

Parashat Ki Tisa, 5780, 2020:

Shabbat and the Jewish People

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven and the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Parashat Ki Tisa is a multi-themed *parasha* that includes six *pasukim* focusing on our people's singular relationship to Shabbat. I find one of these particularly intriguing: “*V’shamru b’nai Yisrael et HaShabbat* — The Jewish people shall keep the Shabbat, *la’asot et HaShabbat* — to make the Shabbat throughout their generations as an eternal covenant.” (31:16) We are immediately met with a classic exegetical challenge: If the Torah deploys the word “*v’shamru*,” why does it also need, “*la’asot*?”

The Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) often presents *peshat*-level (direct) analyses of Torah expressions. He follows suit regarding our *pasuk* when he explains *v’shamru* as:

the Jewish people's obligation to concentrate upon (literally, to guard) the days of the week so that they will not forget which day is Shabbat. In so doing, they will be able to prepare all of its needs — and hone their approach toward keeping Shabbat by the sixth day of the week — in order to guard the integrity of Shabbat and refrain from violating its *kedushah* — holiness. (Translation my own)

For the Ibn Ezra, *v’shamru* connotes keen focus on the days of the week preceding Shabbat to ensure that we maintain the proper levels of *shmirah* — watchfulness and preparation — to safeguard its *kedushah*. Little wonder, then, that he perceives *la’asot* as a natural extension of *v’shamru*, and finds its parallel in an earlier *pasuk* wherein *la’asot* is used

regarding Avraham's alacrity in preparing a meal for his guests (that is, the three Angels):
“And to the cattle did Abraham run, and he took a calf, tender and good, and he gave it to the youth, *va'yimahare la'asot oto* — and he hastened to prepare it.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 18:7, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

In his *Commentary on the Torah* on our verse, Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher (1255-1340) follows the Ibn Ezra's general approach regarding the relationship that obtains between *v'shamru* and *la'asot*. He does more, however, than merely provide us with a reframe of the Ibn Ezra's words, and cites a thought-provoking midrashic statement that does not appear in any of our standard collections of *Midrashim*: *la'asot et HaShabbat*: “*Kol hameshamare* — Anyone who guards — the Shabbat in this world *k'eilu asah* — is as if they have made it — in the Heavens above.” He explains this aphoristic sentence in the following manner:

One who fulfills the *mitzvah* of Shabbat in this world bears testimony that they recognize and believe that Shabbat's roots and essence were [eternally] engraved from above [by the Almighty] ... This, then, is why the Torah writes, *la'asot et HaShabbat*. (Translation and brackets my own)

Rabbeinu Bachya's explanation of the midrash teaches us a central lesson, namely, that when the Jewish people guard the integrity of Shabbat — *v'shamru* — and honor it in this world, we demonstrate our recognition and belief “that Shabbat's roots and essence were engraved from above.” The ongoing act of *la'asot et HaShabbat*, therefore, denotes our connection to Shabbat both in our world and the Heavens above, and enables us to bring glory to Hashem's holy Name.

The following deeply insightful midrashic passage discusses the unique link between Shabbat and the Jewish people, and brings our understanding to an entirely new level:

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai taught: “Shabbat spoke before the Holy One blessed be He and said: ‘Master of the Universe, every other day of the week has a *ben zug* — corresponding partner — yet, I have no partner!’ The Holy One blessed be He responded to her: ‘*Knesset Yisrael* [the transhistorical community of the Jewish people] is your *ben zugach* [and you are, therefore, not alone].’ And when the Jewish people stood before Mount Sinai, the Holy One blessed be He said to them: ‘Remember what I told Shabbat [when I created the world] — “*Knesset Yisrael* is your corresponding partner...”’ (Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 11:8, translation and brackets my own)

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai teaches us that Shabbat’s eternal relationship with *Knesset Yisrael*, and our exclusive connection to her, is built into the very fabric of the Universe. Like the relationship between husband and wife, we are Shabbat’s *ben zugach*, and she is our *ben zug*. While the famous words of *Shlomo HaMelech* (King Solomon) in *Shir HaShirim*, “*ani l’dodi v’dodi li* — I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine,” are almost always interpreted as referring to Hashem and the Jewish people, Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai informs us that they can refer as well to the inextricable connection that obtains between Shabbat and the Jewish people. Perhaps a more beautiful and inspiring idea has yet to be found.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.