JEWISH LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

Work and rest: Thoughts on Parshat Vayakel/Pekudei

From Erica Brown

It seems like everyone today is talking and writing about work: the great resignation, the evolution of office life and the culture of remote meetings. The empty building is the new symbol of American jobs. We're unsure how to get people back into offices or how to retool work life to accommodate the flexibility that has become a right rather than a privilege. The title of Sarah Jaffe's recent book Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone, says it all. Jaffe argues that we have overly romanticized our work lives and created all kinds of unrealistic emotional expectations of what it should be: "We want to call work what is work so that eventually we might rediscover what is love."

Organizational leaders often exploit this need by promoting false images of the fun, mission or sense of familial belonging attached to work, especially to those with little control of their work day: "The compulsion to be happy at work, in other words, is always a demand for emotional work from the worker." Jaffe warns her readers that this premise is mistaken: "Work, after all, has no feelings. Capitalism cannot love." Families, for example, do not fire people. When families relocate, they take you with them.

Jaffe asks that we rethink why we began working in the first place: to pay the bills. Now the dignity of affording one's life has been eclipsed by a notion of work that is an all-consuming identity. The humble brag about overwork has become a cliché: "The ownership class these days does tend to work, and indeed, to make a fetish of its long hours." The tensions she points out are greater with creative work, which is "based in a different kind of self-sacrifice and voluntary commitment that is expected, on some level, to love you back." This, too, is untrue. "Yet work never, ever loves you back."

This week's double Torah reading Vayakhel/Pekudei has a lot to say about work and about when to stop work: "Moses then convoked the whole Israelite community and said to them: "These are the things that God has commanded you to do: On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a sabbath of complete rest, holy to God…" (Ex. 35:1-2). If we closed our eyes, we might be in the early chapters of Genesis, not the closing chapters of Exodus. Our sedra opens by mimicking the language of creation about the purposefulness of work and the necessity of rest. We were to build the Mishkan for six days and rest on the seventh.

What God declared when the world was created reflected the same pattern in building the portable sanctuary to honor him.

The classic commentators make the connection between Shabbat and the Mishkan explicit. Rashi on 35:1, for example, cites the Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, that God instructed Moses about the Sabbath before discussing the building procedures as if to say no matter how extraordinary the work, we must prioritize the sanctity of the Sabbath. One might easily assume that erecting a sacred space to honor God would trump Sabbath observance. The temptation to keep going — to place one more board, to smelt one more fixture, or to embroider one more stitch — would have been overwhelming. Nahmanides highlights the expression "these are the things which the Eternal has commanded" as a reference not only to the building's structures but also to the holy vessels made to service God within its portable walls. Busy yourself as artists for six days, but even this special work must come to an end.

The message could not be clearer. The end of all creation is not building but resting.

The pinnacle of creation can only be achieved by the cessation of creation. It is ironically the Sabbath, the "cathedral in time," as Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel called it, that is the acme of the process. "To gain control of the world of space is certainly one of our tasks," reminds Rabbi Heschel. "The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern."

Vayakhel makes the case that for the ancient Israelites to achieve true piety as a community, they needed to combine holy space with holy time. That is why in the midst of all of the Mishkan's instructions, God assures Moses of our spiritual priorities. This break in the work also flattened whatever artisanal hierarchies existed in the Mishkan's construction. Everyone had a distinct role in the building project. Some had tasks demanding a high level of skill and expertise that made their work seem superior. But when everyone stops working to observe the Shabbat, the community sheds itself of titles and talents. Work creates status. Rest is status-free. I'm always moved by the view from the pew: people with impressive business cards sit beside those too young to work, those who are retired, or those who have simple jobs. It does not matter. In this space, we are all spiritual citizens in the eyes of God, judged not by our place in society but by our goodness and piety. There must be somewhere in the world where the first question someone asks you is not what you do but who you are.

"Our Shabbat is a religious institution," writes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in A Letter in the Scroll. Shabbat is "a memorial to creation, the day on which God Himself rested. But it is also and essentially a political institution. Shabbat is the greatest tutorial in liberty ever devised…One day in seven, Jews create a Messianic society…It is the day on which all hierarchies, all relationships of power are suspended."

Shabbat suspends hierarchy and produces the necessary restoration to keep the holiest of building projects going. Rest is not a weakness. It is our greatest strength. Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz, who used to coach Olympic athletes and then began working with corporate leaders, share that one of the most important lessons they learned from extraordinary athletes is the way they build recovery into their routines. In their book, The Power of Full Engagement, they write, "We live in a world that celebrates work and activity, ignores renewal and recovery, and fails to recognize that both are necessary for sustained high performance."

As a leader, how do you build rest and recovery into your routine to maintain high performance? How can you integrate more of Shabbat's gifts into your life?

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