

The POWER of Shabbos – Rabbi D Cohn

י"א חשוון תשע"ו – 24th October 2015 - שבת פ' לך לך

The פסוק at the beginning of ויקהל says:

ויקהל משה את כל עדת בני ישראל ויאמר אלהם אלה הדברים אשר צוה ה' לעשות אתם

“And Moshe assembled all the congregation of the Children of Israel and he said to them, ‘These are the things that Hashem has commanded us to do’.”

This is followed by the command to keep שבת, as the פסוק says

ששת ימים תעשה מלאכה וביום השביעי יהיה לכם קדש

“For six days Melocha shall be done and the seventh day shall be holy for you”

There are two obvious questions:

(1) Why was it so important that the entire Jewish people needed to be assembled?

(2) The words 'אלה הדברים...' in the first פסוק quoted above imply that an exhaustive list of מצוות is about to follow. However we find that the subsequent פסוקים only discuss the one מצוה of שבת.

Many of us are acquainted with first-hand accounts of people who came to this country in the first half of the last century and were מוסר נפש to keep שבת in very adverse circumstances. They would find a new job on Monday, only to be dismissed the following Friday afternoon, when they insisted on being allowed to leave work in order to be home in time for שבת. Each week these new Jewish immigrants would return home with the news that they had lost their only source of income - a huge נסיון, especially in view of the fact that there were no welfare benefits to be had. Nevertheless there were those who withstood the challenge and soldiered on. Others unfortunately succumbed to the pressure of earning a stable livelihood, and stopped keeping שבת as a result.

Generally those who remained loyal to שבת observance remained frum, as did their descendants. Those who compromised their שבת observance often very quickly lost their connection to Judaism, despite their original pledge to remain committed to all other מצוות.

This stark contrast is indeed forecasted in the first פסוק of ויקהל. Although שבת is only one מצוה out of six hundred and thirteen, it is the crucial link between הקב"ה and His people, and the key to our nation's survival. Hence אלה הדברים justifiably refers only to שבת because the observance of שבת is pivotal to the keeping of all the other מצוות. It is also self understood that this vital message had to be relayed to the entire assembly of the Jewish nation.

This is reinforced by the famous פסוק that we recite each week in the שבת morning קדוש

ושמרו בני את השבת לעשות את השבת לדרתם ברית עולם ביני ובין בני ישראל את היא לעלם

“And the Children of Israel shall keep the Shabbos, to make the Shabbos an eternal covenant for their generations. Between Me and the Children of Israel it is a sign forever...”

If we strive for continuity and eternity within ישראל ככל both collectively and as individuals, if our goal is that we want to ensure that the תורה is practised in the succeeding generations, and kept by our children and grandchildren forever – לדרתם ברית עולם – the secret is שבת. שמרו בני ישראל את השבת is the eternal sign of connection that exists between us and our Creator, it is the 'אות לעולם'.

But why should this be so? Why is the observance of שבת so pivotal to the continuation of our people?

In Sefer Yeshaya, פסוק ב, 'פרק נ"ו', פסוק ב, the נביא tells us

...שומר שבת מחללו ושומר ידו מעשות כל רע

“He who guards שבת not to profane it and he who guards his hand not to do evil.”

At first glance there does not seem to be any correlation between the two phrases in this פסוק. However on closer observation we may notice that the נביא is informing us of a natural progression. A person who commits himself to keeping שבת properly will be imbued with an extra measure of holiness – קדושה – which in turn will provide him with the inner strength he needs to keep all the other מצוות.

In the same vein we ask Hashem in the שבת morning עשרה

אלקיני ואלקי אבותינו רצה במנוחתנו קדשנו במצותיך ותן חלקנו בתורתך

“Our G-d and the G-d of our fathers, may you be pleased with our rest. Sanctify us with your commandments and grant our share in Your Torah..... And purify our heart to serve you sincerely.”

Once we have experienced and kept the day of שבת, we are invested with an extra קדושה so that we feel more inclined to keep the Torah. The observance of its מצוות then becomes much easier throughout the whole ensuing week. This will, in turn, open our hearts to desire to learn the Torah until we are eventually able to reach the incredible spiritual height of באמת לעבדך באמת.

It transpires therefore that increasing the quality of our שבת observance has a knock-on effect on our observance of all the מצוות.