



PARSHAS VAYAKHEL-PEKUDEI – MICHAEL KESZTENBAUM

Rashi explains that Moshe came down from Har Sinai on Yom Kippur, and then on the next day he assembled Bnei Yisrael not to speak at them as an orator, but rather to learn Torah with them and thereby bring them together. Hence the word Vayakel 'cause them to gather' is used.

The main focus of Vayakhel is the Mishkan; what needs to be done, how it is to be built, what is its importance, etc. However, Moshe began by again outlining the mitzvah of Shabbos, explaining that Bnei Yisrael are allowed to work for 6 days, but that the seventh day must be holy, a day of complete rest. In the next sentence Moshe said that Bnei Yisrael must not light a fire in any of their homes on Shabbos. Then in the 4th sentence of the Sidra the description of the Mishkan begins.

Why the reminder of Shabbos at all, and specifically why is the melacha of fire singled out?

Ramban answers the first question by explaining that from here we learn that crucial as the mitzvah to build the Mishkan was, Bnei Yisrael were not allowed to build it, nor any of the vessels needed for the Mishkan, on Shabbos. If Moshe had not begun by explaining the mitzvah of Shabbos, Bnei Yisrael might have thought that the Mishkan took precedence. So although we have already learnt about Shabbos, we now come to understand just how crucial a mitzvah it is.

The Slonimer Rebbe notes that many of Bnei Yisrael had just been involved with the sin of the Golden Calf, and reiterating the mitzvah of Shabbos illustrates the power keeping Shabbos can have to purify Bnei Yisrael from their sins. He takes the word Vayakel, 'to cause them to gather together', as an indication of how we can come together on Shabbos as a nation with one heart. This gave the generation of Bnei Yisrael in the midbar the opportunity of using the power of Shabbos as a help for Teshuva, and according to the Slonimer the same opportunity exists for Bnei Yisrael today.

Why then is the Melacha of 'lighting a fire in any of your dwellings' singled out, and the only one quoted?

Rashi quotes two opinions, which are described in the Gemoro Shabbos, 70a:-

1. That all the other 38 melachas are punishable by death, whereas lighting a fire could be regarded as a negative commandment, and hence liable for makkos and not death. This is consistent with Rav Yose in the Gemora.
2. Lighting a fire was included in the general statement that prohibited work on Shabbos. It was removed from the general rule and stated separately so as to teach that it is a distinct form of work, and hence carries a distinct penalty. This applies equally to all the categories of work incorporated within the general statement. There is no general category of work, rather a set of distinct types of work. Accordingly if different kinds of work were carried out on Shabbos, without the person doing these actions knowing that they are forbidden the person has to bring a separate sin offering for each individual labour carried out. The Gemora explains that it was specified so as to compare it to the other 38 melachas, and just as lighting a fire is an av melacha, so one is liable for each individual av melacha separately.

Ramban has a different answer. He says that the key issue is that if this sentence were not included here, it is possible that we might think that the prohibition of using fire on Shabbos refers specifically to cooking food on Shabbos. However, because it is quoted as the example of what must not be done if we are to keep Shabbos properly, we learn that it refers to the full range of applications for fire, such as heating the body as well as cooking. Another possible explanation is that if we didn't have anything to eat for Shabbos, we might think that in that case we could cook on Shabbos, the proximity to the verse that says no work on Shabbos, thereby shows that this is not the case.

Rav Alexander Zusia Friedman has another perspective, which he references to Shela. During the whole week we live in a world of commerce and ordinary activities. When it comes to Shabbos, we relax and take on the full benefit of menucha. The sin of lighting a fire is quoted so that we should be aware that even in such a different context when our guard might be more down, we should be aware of the risk of harming Shabbos with the 'flames' of Loshan Haroh. This explanation fits with several commentators who compare the destructiveness of fire, to the constructive element inherent in the other melachas.

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