

PARASHAS VAYAKHEL

Don't Roll Up Your Sleeves

It was the day after Yom Kippur. Moses had come down from the mountain for the second time, and he immediately summoned all the people to a mass meeting. A surge of excitement swept through the Jewish encampment in the desert. What was the purpose of this urgent meeting? What divine message had Moses brought to the people? Had Hashem truly forgiven them for the sin of the Golden Calf?

The answers were not long in coming. Moses was carrying a message of reconciliation from Hashem. He had instructed the people to build a Mishkan, a holy Tabernacle, in which the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, would reside among the Jewish people. This would serve as atonement for their transgression and bring a new closeness between the Creator and His chosen people.

It is interesting to note, however, that this message came with a preface - a stern warning that the Sabbath not be desecrated. What was the purpose of introducing the building of the Mishkan with the prohibition against desecrating the Sabbath? Rashi explains that it was meant to teach that the building of the Mishkan had to be interrupted at sundown on Friday. But the question still remains: Numerous laws apply to the building of the Mishkan. Why then was this particular rule, the suspension of work on the Sabbath, singled out for special mention?

The commentators explain that this stern warning was meant to steer the people away from the dangerous path that had led to the Golden Calf. The people had known full well that building an idol was forbidden, but the fear that Moses would not return drove them into a panic. How would they communicate with Hashem in the absence of Moses? In desperation, they sought another medium. They took the liberty of rationalizing that the pressing needs of the moment were paramount, and if it took a Golden Calf to establish contact with Hashem, so be it. In actuality, however, they should not have presumed to judge when to keep the rules and when to break them.

This was the message of the prohibition against building the Mishkan on the Sabbath. One might think that this project was of such transcendent importance that nothing could stand in its way. But not so! I am the judge of these things, said Hashem, not you. Our acceptance of the Divine Wisdom must be absolute, unquestioning, without rationalizations, because we cannot possibly know all the factors which enter into the divine decision-making process.

A king once appointed a new ambassador to a neighboring country. "Promise me one thing," said the king. "Never ever roll up your sleeve in public!"

The ambassador was puzzled, but he promised.

At the end of his tour of duty, his host country threw a lavish banquet in his honor.

"I heard," the president announced in front of the assembled dignitaries. "that all you people have black scars on your upper arms. Is this true?"

"Of course not," said the ambassador.

"Then show me. Roll up your sleeve."

The ambassador was shaken by this unexpected request, but remembering his promise, he politely refused.

The president called him aside. "Listen, my friend. You must roll up your sleeve for me. I will make it worth your while. You can have a chest full of precious stones - if only you don't embarrass me in public by refusing."

The ambassador was caught on the horns of a dilemma. Suddenly, he was struck by a brilliant idea. He would accept the chest of precious stones and present it to his king. In this way, he would satisfy the king and not offend the president.

With a dramatic flourish, he rolled up his sleeve, and sure enough, there was no black scar on his upper arm.

When he returned home, the king greeted him angrily.

"But, your majesty," said the ambassador, "I brought you a chest full of gems!"

"Fool!" cried the king. "I had a secret wager with the president. He said he could induce you to break your promise, and I said he couldn't. The loser of the wager agreed to pay the winner not one but ten chests full of precious stones. You gained one chest for me, true, but you caused me to lose ten. You should simply have kept your promise."

In our own lives, we are sometimes faced with situations which tempt us to compromise on the values and ideals of the Torah in order to achieve some greater good. But it is not for us to make these kind of cosmic calculations, which are better left to our Creator. The guidelines for right and wrong are spelled out clearly in the Torah. Instead of rationalizing and breaking the rules, it would be far wiser - and safer - to keep our sleeves rolled down.