

The bulk of Parashat Behar discusses the laws of shemittah (the sabbatical year) and Jewish slavery. At the conclusion of the Parashah, however, we find a brief exhortation against various idolatrous rituals and the following verse (Vayikra 26:2): “et shabtotai tishm’ru umikdashi tirau – ani Hashem”, which we will translate for now as “My sabbaths you shall observe, and my My Sacred thing you shall fear – I am G-d.”

Note that this verse is identical to Vayikra 19:30. (Note also the Zohar’s parallel between this verse and Isaiah 58:13, where the *kds*h parallel to Shabbat seems to be Yom Tov. The Zohar also notes that in Vayikra 19:3 observance of “shabtotai” is paralleled with fear of parents”.)

17th) Why is “sabbaths” plural?

This may not be a compelling question, but some use it to justify the claim that at least one of the sabbaths referred to here is the sabbatical year. Ibn Ezra takes the logical step of then interpreting “sacred thing” as the Jubilee year, but this interpretation has not been well-received. The Zohar takes this to refer to two different kabbalistic aspects of Shabbat.

17th) What is the “sacred thing” referred to here?

We have already seen Ibn Ezra and the Zohar. Most midrashim take this to refer to the Temple, while Seforno takes it to refer to any sacred place, e.g. a synagogue, in the Diaspora.

17th) Why are Sabbath-observance and Mikdash-fear juxtaposed?

There are any number of halakhic answers to this question, including:

One) to tell us that one cannot build the Temple on Shabbat

Two) to tell us that one can perform the Temple rituals on Shabbat

Three) to tell us that the sanctity of the Temple mount is coextensive with the sanctity of Shabbat, i.e. eternal.

Four) (Meshekh Chokmah, assuming that “sabbaths” refers to the sabbatical year) – the requirement to add thirty days to the sabbatical year as a preventive measure applies only while the Temple stands

Five) (Netziv, assuming that “sacred thing” means yom tov) – one may not violate yom tov to prepare food for non-Jewish owners even though preparing food for other Jews is perfectly acceptable

Aggadic answers include:

One) to teach us that fear of the Temple must be fear of G-d rather than fetishistic

Two) to warn us that failure to observe the sabbatical year will lead to the destruction of the Temple.

17th) What is the connection between this last section – and particularly the last verse – and the rest of the parashah?

Note that the arranger of the chapters believed this section to be the start of the next section instead of the end of this one – it’s not clear to me that this alternative connection is clearer.

Note also that many midrashim suggest that the point is that one may not violate commandments at the behest of a non-Jewish owner/employer, or under the stresses of poverty and exile. This seems to me vague – why are these issues specifically chosen? Ramban refers elliptically to a mystical claim that all the commandments can be subsumed under the rubrics of Shabbat and Temple. Perhaps this is because collectively they establish the potential sanctity of Time and Space, the basic parameters of our existence. Alternatively, the Temple and Shabbat may respectively represent the active and contemplative modes of religious experience.

In conclusion, note the contrast – not necessarily contradiction – between the midrashic interpretation that the verse is a warning to preserve the temple and Seforno’s interpretation that it is a warning not to take lightly the substitute sanctuaries of the Diaspora.

Shabbat Shalom!

