

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub:

Keeping Judaism Fresh

Shabbat Zachor / Parshat T'zave | 11 Adar; 6-7 March 2009

Over the Shabbatot between February 21 and March 21 of this year, we read in the Torah fifteen chapters full of painstaking details about the construction of the Mishkan, the ancient Tabernacle, its furnishing and implements. Hundreds of verses describe minutely the length of the boards, the castings of sockets, the moldings of tables, the fabrics of curtains, and various features of staves, pillars, rings, dishes, spoons, vestments, knobs, shafts, and loops.

In contrast, the Torah says next to nothing about some of the most central *halachot*, laws of Judaism. Marriage and divorce, inheritance, laws of personal injury or property damage, often occupy only a few verses. The Shabbat laws, which will become the hallmark of an observant Jewish law, are discussed only in the broadest way. The details come only in the oral law, centuries later.

The Tabernacle and its sacrificial system were limited in space — and according to many Rabbis also in time — to ancient Israel. In contrast, Shabbat, *Kashruth* and other ritual categories are ongoing. Therefore, the Torah left their specific development up to the evolving life and interpretation of Jews in history.

We may not work on Shabbat, but what defines work? We may not cook on Shabbat but what exactly constitutes cooking? We may not “go out from (our) place on the Seventh Day” (Exodus 16:29). But what is our place? Our home, neighborhood, city? Shall we not go out at all? Shall we just limit our travel? We may not light fire on Shabbat, but is electricity OK, since it does not have a flame?

The *Mitzvot* of Torah need constant re-interpretation. Otherwise, they become ossified and irrelevant. Challenged continually, they become a law of life. The Torah is sacred precisely because we continue to observe its *Mitzvot*, even though our practice would be strange to the Jews of Medieval France, just as theirs would be strange to the wandering Israelites of the desert generation.

The challenge of religious teachers, especially in modernity, is to apply divine principles to modern reality. The Torah says that we should not intermingle species? What import does that have for genetic engineering? The Torah inveighs against *Baal Tashchit*, the unnecessary destruction of resources. Can we then use styrofoam containers even if they have never touched nonkosher food? The Torah forbids enjoying *P'ri Oshek*, the fruits of oppression. So can we make a Shabbis Kugel with potatoes picked by underpaid and unprotected migrant workers?

Halacha, Jewish law, is a living being, which must be nourished, taught and re-taught. We, the historical Jewish peoplehood, are the proud parents and teachers.