



Vayakhel-Pekudei

Vol. 10, Issue 25 • 24 Adar 5786 / March 13, 2025

CONTENTS: Sperber (Page 1); Kurin (Page 5)

Sponsorships for future editions of Lehrhaus over Shabbat are available at <https://thelehrhaus.com/sponsor-lehrhaus-shabbos/>

***The Appropriation of Jewish Renewal
Discourse: How Zionist-Religious Hegemony
Erases Israel's Diverse Jewish Spectrum***

David Sperber is the editor of Images: A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture, published by Brill.

In recent years, calls for Jewish renewal in Israel have become increasingly urgent. Faced with the exhaustion of the religious-secular divide as a structuring principle of Jewish life, a growing range of educators, rabbis, artists, and cultural thinkers have sought new languages through which Jewish tradition might once again function as a living horizon rather than as a sectarian boundary. These efforts often present themselves as attempts to articulate a “third way” beyond rigid denominational identities – one that treats

Judaism not merely as belief or law, but as culture, ethics, practice, memory, and shared inheritance.

Yet, the language of renewal is never neutral. In Israel, Jewish renewal is inseparable from questions of authority and legitimacy: Who is allowed to speak in the name of Judaism? Which forms of renewal are recognized as authentic, and which are dismissed as marginal, foreign, or irrelevant? And which genealogies of renewal are remembered, translated, or quietly erased in the process?

These questions have become especially visible with the emergence of initiatives that explicitly claim to move beyond the religious-secular binary while grounding themselves firmly within Zionist-Religious (*dati le’umi*) leadership and language.

One prominent example is the [“Lekhathilah” movement](#), which presents itself as a non-sectarian framework for Jewish depth, culture, and halakhic seriousness. Its stated goal – to renew Jewish life without reproducing the old binaries – is compelling. But the way this goal is articulated, and the sources it acknowledges or ignores, reveal a broader structural tension in contemporary Israeli Jewish discourse.

Jewish Renewal and the Promise of Post-Binary Life

Efforts to loosen the grip of the religious-secular divide did not begin with the most recent wave of renewal initiatives. Over the past two decades, Israel has seen the growth of pluralistic *batei midrash*, joint educational frameworks, and cultural institutions that insist on Jewish study as a shared practice rather than a marker of sectarian belonging. Midreshet Ein Prat, founded in 2001 as a pluralistic *beit midrash*, brought together participants from religious, traditional, and secular backgrounds for sustained Jewish learning. More recently, the Jerusalem-based “Neviah” school has articulated an explicitly post-binary pedagogy, framing Judaism as a cultural and ethical horizon rather than as a denominational identity.

What unites these projects is not a single theology, but a sociological insight: lived Jewish experience in Israel no longer maps neatly onto inherited categories. Many Israelis pray without identifying as “religious,” study Jewish texts without accepting halakhic authority, or seek moral and cultural depth in Jewish sources without

committing to institutional religion. Renewal, in this sense, names an already-existing reality rather than a future aspiration.

A “New Torah” and the Boundaries of Renewal

The longing for renewal has recently been condensed into the evocative language of a “New Torah.” Following the events of October 7, the Zionist-Religious poet and educator Elhanan Nir published a poem in *Haaretz* calling for a “new Mishnah and a new Gemara,” alongside “new literature and new cinema.” The poem was first published in English translation for *The Lehrhaus* under the title [“Now we need a New Torah.”](#) It was widely read as an attempt to stretch the category of Torah beyond its conventional boundaries, placing contemporary cultural production – poetry, art, film – alongside classical rabbinic texts.

At the same time, the poem’s reception exposed a persistent fault line. While many readers in liberal Jewish circles embraced Nir’s call as resonating with long-standing non-Orthodox approaches to renewal, Nir himself later expressed discomfort with this embrace, [suggesting a clear boundary](#) in the discourse he wished to establish. The discomfort was telling: renewal was welcome, but only when it could be clearly distinguished from Reform or liberal Judaism. The fear was not innovation as such, but the loss of Orthodox authority over innovation.

Lived Judaism Beyond the Binary

My own biography offers a concrete illustration of this tension. Raised within Religious Zionism and educated in its central institutions – including the

Mercaz HaRav and Har Etzion yeshivas – I later received rabbinic ordination from the Reform movement’s Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. That move did not represent a passage from “religious” to “secular,” but rather a refusal of the binary itself. In my [ordination sermon](#), though not stated explicitly, the animating claim was that Reform Jewish communities in Israel articulate, more clearly than any other framework, a lived alternative to the religious-secular divide. Although institutionally religious, these communities do not operate within the political category of “religious” as it functions in Israeli public discourse, but instead give shape to forms of Jewish life that move beyond this binary.

This refusal became tangible when my eldest son entered a joint public kindergarten. Initially registered as “secular,” he was barred from participating in the school’s prayer time. When reclassified as “religious,” prayer became mandatory. In both cases, the institution assumed that Jewish identity could only function through fixed categories. For a child raised in a Reform community – where prayer, study, obligation, and choice coexist – neither position made sense. The problem was not theology or belief, but classification.

Such moments reveal the everyday cost of maintaining rigid taxonomies in a society whose Jewish life has already outgrown them.

Renewal Already Practiced

The forms of renewal now described as daring

innovations did not emerge in a vacuum. For decades, non-Orthodox Jewish communities in Israel have cultivated practices that deliberately blur the religious-secular divide. One concrete example comes from my own rabbinical studies at Hebrew Union College.

In a required course on *halakhah* – one of several core courses structured in this way – students, believers, and skeptics alike were asked to complete a simple but demanding sentence: “If *halakhah* is..., then I am a halakhic Jew.” The exercise neither rejected *halakhah* nor sanctified it uncritically. Instead, it required each of us to articulate a personal and responsible relationship to *halakhah* as a source of meaning, obligation, critique, or inspiration. Authority was not abolished, but reconfigured as dialogical rather than coercive. Significantly, the same exercise continues to shape rabbinic formation: again, this year, one of the college’s newly ordained rabbis based her entire [credential sermon](#) on Nir’s poem.

This pedagogical framework matters not because it was exceptional, but precisely because it was ordinary – embedded in the routine formation of rabbis and educators rather than framed as a radical intervention. Many of the gestures now celebrated as daring innovations within Orthodox renewal discourse – flexible authority, cultural translation, ethical centrality, and the refusal of rigid identity labels – were already being practiced, quite matter-of-factly, as part of an established pedagogical culture rather than as an isolated experiment.

Selective Inheritance: A Specific Israeli Case

This pattern of renewal through selective inheritance becomes especially visible in public discourse surrounding *Lekhathilah*. In an [interview](#) published in *Makor Rishon*, R. Chayim Vidal, a senior figure in the movement's leadership and chair of its public council, argued that Judaism should be understood not merely as a religion but as a broad culture or civilization. To illustrate this point, he turned to the thought of A. D. Gordon, presenting Gordon as a key source for this expansive understanding of Judaism and expressing concern about what he described as "cultural ignorance" in Israeli society.

What often goes unremarked in such discussions is that the most systematic articulation of Judaism as a civilization was formulated not by Zionist thinkers, but by R. Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, already in the early twentieth century. The preference for citing A. D. Gordon rather than Kaplan is therefore not incidental. Gordon's Zionist idiom registers as native and self-evidently Israeli, whereas Kaplan's thought – identified with non-Orthodox and Diaspora Judaism – remains largely absent from Israeli public discourse. This absence is frequently justified by the assumption that liberal denominations represent diaspora imports that do not fully belong within Israeli Judaism.¹ What is ultimately embraced, then, is not the genealogy of the idea but the idea itself, once it has been

severed from its non-Orthodox origins. This is not an isolated oversight but a recurring mechanism: renewal is made culturally acceptable through translation into Orthodox-Zionist idioms, while parallel or prior non-Orthodox frameworks are left unacknowledged.

Renewal, Critique, and a Concrete Shift

It would be a mistake to interpret this mechanism solely as an expression of bad faith. Structures, unlike intentions, can change – and in this case, critique has already begun to produce movement.

Following the publication of my earlier critique in *Makor Rishon*, *Lekhathilah* took a notable step. At a recent public event in Tel Aviv devoted to *halakhah* and its contemporary meaning – organized by Mabu'a, the network associated with Midreshet Ein Prat, and presented in cooperation with *Lekhathilah* – a Reform rabbi was invited to participate in the discussion. The presence of Yoav Sorek, head of *Lekhathilah*, underscored the significance of this moment as a concrete shift in the terms of the conversation. This was not a symbolic gesture but a substantive acknowledgment that conversations about *halakhah*, culture, and Jewish renewal cannot be confined to Orthodox voices alone.

This development does not negate the structural argument advanced here. On the contrary, it confirms it. The very fact that critique could open

¹ See also David Sperber, "[Not Orthodox, Not Secular: Reform Jewish Israelis Are Not Welcome in Israel](#)," *Haaretz* (June 14 2025).

the door to such participation demonstrates both the persistence of exclusion and the possibility of its transformation.

Recognition as the Condition of Renewal

Jewish renewal in Israel today does not suffer from a lack of creativity or commitment. What it lacks is a shared language of recognition – one capable of acknowledging that many of its most compelling ideas have already been lived, tested, and refined within non-Orthodox frameworks.

To move beyond the religious-secular divide requires more than new initiatives or poetic calls for a “New Torah.” It requires the willingness to recognize renewal wherever it has taken root, even when it emerges outside the boundaries of Orthodox legitimacy. Only then can Jewish renewal become not a project of selective inheritance, but a genuinely shared endeavor.

The Tabernacle as a Response to the Failure in the Garden of Eden

Michael Kurin is a practicing gastroenterologist at MetroHealth Medical Center in Cleveland, OH, where he lives with his wife and 4 children.

Introduction

Discussion of the purpose of the Tabernacle typically revolves around its relationship to the sin of the Golden Calf. Commentaries discuss the chronology of events: whether the command to build the Tabernacle preceded the sin, or came in response to it¹. Scholars have suggested it additionally serves as a recreation of the revelation at Mount Sinai². R’ Menachem Liebttag, based on several textual parallels, has proposed that the Tabernacle offers the potential to repair the sin of Adam and Eve and an opportunity to return to the close existence with God that was lost after the sin³. This essay presents an additional explanation meant to supplement rather than replace any of the above: that the Tabernacle represents a fulfillment of the human desire to partner with God in contributing to the completion of Creation, a desire that was left unfulfilled in the Garden of Eden. The Tabernacle offers a second chance at a close communion with God, but this time under different parameters

¹ See, for example, Rashi to [Exodus 31:18](#), and Ramban to [Exodus 25:1](#).

² See, for example R’ Menachem Liebttag at <https://tanach.org/shmot/pkud.txt>. This notion is based on the commentary of Ramban to Exodus 25:1.

³ <https://outorah.org/p/37472/>

more palatable to the human psyche. Understanding this approach requires a focused analysis of the beginning of Genesis.

Return to Genesis: Adam and Eve’s Original Mission

As the book of Genesis unfolds, we are introduced to various models of humanity’s mission and purpose. Ultimately, the humanity that persists permanently with their God-given mission is the Abrahamic line, with their inheritance of the land of Israel and their eventual receipt of the Torah. But what are we to make of the earlier iterations of humankind’s purpose? In 2022, R’ Yaakov Nagen authored an essay in which he proposed that the opening chapters of Genesis establish the importance of a value that is too often overlooked.⁴ We typically categorize *mitzvot* into two groups: those between man and God, and those between fellow people. R’ Nagen noted that the original *mitzvot* given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (“be fruitful and multiply,” establish benevolent dominion over animals, and “to cultivate and guard” the garden) do not fit into either of these categories. Instead, they establish a third category he called *mitzvot “bein adam la-olam,”* between the human being and the world. Essentially, we are to populate the world, care for its environment, and ensure continuity of animal species. These express a universal ethic of stewardship that he believes flows from our

tzelem Elokim: it is through this God-image in each of us that God invites humankind to partner with him in completing the creation of the world. This reading assigns high value to environmental consciousness and a universalist message upon which to find common ground with other nations and religions based on the Edenic values that preceded the more particularistic Abrahamic line.

While I certainly espouse the values that R’ Nagen highlights, I will suggest that the Edenic *mitzvot* are not an expression of mankind’s Godliness in completing the creation of the world. In fact, they are lacking in this exact feature. Adam and Eve were commanded to be caretakers, not true partners, and this may have contributed to their failure in the Edenic mission. As we will see below, humankind’s Godliness does eventually find its expression with the building of the Tabernacle.

Partners or Caretakers?

It is reasonable to assume, as R’ Nagen does, that the function of the *tzelem Elokim* is to liken humans to God as creators. After all, to this point in Genesis all we know of God is that He is the Creator. If we are to be likened to Him, it would be fitting that we are likened in that attribute of God to which we have been introduced. However, nowhere in the text does it say that the *mitzvot* Adam and Eve are given in the Garden of Eden represent an expression of their *tzelem Elokim*. Let

⁴ <https://thelehrhaus.com/timely-thoughts/what-does-god-want-from-humanity-a-new-perspective-on-the-creation-chapters/>

us carefully examine the three commandments at hand to determine whether they express a God-like contribution to the creation of the world.

1. Be fruitful and multiply⁵

God did not create the world to be empty of humans save for Adam and Eve, so populating the world was certainly part of God's design for humankind. However, this command cannot flow from our God-image. The ability to procreate is not unique to humans. Animals, too, filled the world by reproducing. Since animals were not created with a *tzelem Elokim*, the ability to reproduce cannot be a manifestation of the *tzelem Elokim*, nor can it represent a unique Divine-human creative partnership. Fundamentally, populating the world is really about filling in the gaps with more of what already exists, rather than creating anything new⁶. The relationship is akin to that between the creator of a children's coloring book and the child who colors in the pictures. This is not a true partnership. One person is clearly the creator, while the other is merely filling in the empty space, sometimes in a way that detracts from the quality of the outlined picture, rather than enhancing it.

⁵ [Genesis 1:28](#)

⁶ One could argue on an individual familial unit level that having a child is a true partnership with God. In fact there is literature to support this (see [Niddah 31a](#), [Kiddushin 30b](#)). However, this is more in the sense that we can create a person just like God created man. The similarity does not

2. Have dominion over the animals⁷

The command to have dominion over the animals is difficult to interpret. If it means to make use of the animals for our own devices, this would represent not an enhancement of creation, but at best, making use of God's creation – and at worst, a destruction of God's creation. If, as R' Nagen suggests in the name of Rav Kook, it means to establish benevolent rulership over the animals, this rulership would function to maintain the continuity of each animal species. Again, this does not involve the creation of anything new, or even the advancement of what God created, but rather maintenance of what God has created and preventing its destruction.

3. Cultivate and guard the Garden⁸

Taking care of the Garden perhaps represents the best chance at a true partnership model. Here we are not merely filling in the space but actually bringing forth the potential within the world that God created. However, an examination of the command itself will show this is not the case. God uses two words when describing to Adam and Eve their role in the Garden of Eden: *L'ovdah* (to work

carry over to the global perspective, to say that populating the empty world is akin to creating it.

⁷ [Genesis 1:28](#)

⁸ [Genesis 2:15](#)

it), *u'L'shomrah* (and to guard it). Guarding something is inherently not creative. It means to maintain the stability of something that God has already created. Working the land is a creative process to some degree, but one wonders what kind of work this entailed when it seems that working the land in order to grow produce is part of Adam's punishment after the sin.

Many commentaries presume that the work required in the Garden of Eden was quite light, to say the least. Ibn Ezra (Genesis 2:15) suggests it means to water the garden and protect it from animals. Indeed, Rambam⁹ implies that the workload in Eden was intentionally minimal so that Adam and Eve would have time to pursue spiritual and intellectual matters instead.

But more important than the difficulty of the work is the nature of it. I would like to highlight an important textual distinction. The verb *avodah*, which is used to describe Adam and Eve's task in the Garden, belies a lack of God-like creativity, and thus negates the possibility that the job itself is an expression of the *tzelem Elokim* as Creator.

⁹ Moreh Nevuchim [part 1 chapter 2](#)

¹⁰ Importantly, the picture is probably more complex in reality than the one I am painting. Farming, or working the land, is somewhat of a hybrid between *avodah* and *melacha*. On the one hand, it is called *avodat adama*, signifying its placement in the *avodah* category, likely for the reasons explained in this paragraph. On the other hand, many of the 39 *melachot* relate to farming and the agricultural process,

Avodah vs. Melacha: Two Distinct Forms of Labor

The Torah's two major terms for "work" represent two distinct modalities of religious labor. *Avodah* is perhaps best translated as service. It is a type of work that is regimented with rules that are beyond the control of the laborer. *Avodah* appears in several contexts throughout the Chumash and all follow this pattern.

- a. Working the land. Adam's punishment is the need to toil in working the land, for example (Genesis 3:23).
- b. Bondage or slavery (Exodus 1:14).
- c. Tabernacle service (Numbers 3:7-8)
- d. Service of God (Deuteronomy 10:12)

What these uses all have in common is the laborer's lack of control over the requirements of the labor, and submission to another being or force. *Avodah* connotes regulated, duty-bound performance in deference to a higher power. Working land to grow produce is in some ways a regimented process in which the farmer must adhere to the agricultural process in order for the land to make produce¹⁰. Deviating from that

and in reality farming does require adaptation to changing weather patterns and environments, and creativity and innovation in finding new and more efficient ways to produce an optimal yield. For the purposes of this essay, we will not focus on this complexity, but instead on the fact that farming requires submission to nature and that Adam and Eve's role in the Garden of Eden was likely much more simple than farming, as explained below.

recipe will result in a poor yield. Furthermore, the farmer remains submitted to the whims of mother nature, leaving the success of his work outside the realm of his total control. Slave work definitionally involves a lack of control for the worker and total submission to the master. Tabernacle service performed by the priests also involves a regimented process in which deviation from the rules can result in death. Lastly, service of God hinges upon submission to His will.

To be clear, there is creativity to be had in most of these forms of *avodah*. However, in some cases the creativity is more in the spiritual-intellectual-emotional realm. In others, such as working the land, the creativity still comes in the context of a regimented procedure and in the setting of subservience to nature¹¹.

Melacha, on the other hand, can be defined as creative workmanship. This definition flows from its usages throughout the Chumash as well.

- a. Creation of the world and cessation on Shabbat (Genesis 2:1-3)
- b. The work that is forbidden on Shabbat (Exodus 20:9-10)
- c. Designing the Tabernacle (Exodus 35:31-33)

The commonality between these is the connotation of creative craftsmanship that requires intelligent design. God's creation of the world is often termed intelligent design. The building of the Tabernacle involved creative, constructive, intentional artisanship. The Torah explicitly uses the phrase "*melech machshevet*" (loosely translated as work that requires intelligence and intent) to describe the form of the work. Lastly, the forms of work forbidden on Shabbat assume this same character because they are modeled after God's creation of the world and the building of the Tabernacle. *Melacha* is what God rested from on the 7th day of creation, implying that this form of *melacha* parallels the nature of God's creation, namely intelligent design. Furthermore, the 39 forbidden forms of work on Shabbat are also patterned after the building of the Tabernacle. Chazal even borrowed the phrase "*melech machshevet*" from the Tabernacle to describe the actions required to be liable for violating Shabbat. Moreover, Rav Samson Rafael Hirsch, lamenting those who mistake Shabbat for a day of rest from physical exertion, declared that toil requiring exertion is permitted on Shabbat as long as no *melacha* is involved. He defined *melacha* as creative, constructive, intentional craft that brings an

¹¹ Due to this complexity, it is difficult to define where exactly *avodah* ends and *melacha* begins. For the purposes of this essay, it is less important to determine where exactly to draw that line, and more important to acknowledge the different connotations of *avodah* and *melacha*, wherever

the specific divide may be. Even if one argues there is some overlap with some actions able to be both *avodah* and *melacha*, such as farming, that would not detract from the presentation here.

intended result into reality (commentary to Exodus 20:9).

Eden's Directive and Sin

What, then, is commanded in Eden? To serve and to protect the Garden. Eden's charge is *avodah*, not *melacha*. It is unclear what kind of work was actually required to maintain the Garden, an environment bereft of unpredictable weather patterns that form some of the challenge of land-work¹². But whatever the details, Adam and Eve's role in the Garden of Eden was likely regimented and submissive, not a license for intelligent creativity, innovation, and advancement. Thus, even if a value of environmentalism or *bein adam la-olam* is being expressed here, it cannot flow from our *tzelem Elokim*, or represent a human-divine partnership based on mutual creativity.

In fact, I would suggest this lack of creative outlet may be what doomed the Garden of Eden experiment. Humans were created with a *tzelem Elokim*, which we've defined as the ability to be an intelligent designer. But where was that aspect of humankind to find expression in the Garden of Eden? A careful reading of the text suggests this desire to actualize their ability in intelligent design is a significant factor that led to Adam and Eve's sin. As Eve is about to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, it says "And the woman saw that it [the fruit] was good..." (Genesis 3:6), a phrase reminiscent of the refrain throughout Genesis

¹² It is important to note that Adam and Eve are never actually told to work the land. Their purpose is described as "*L'ovdah*," meaning to work "it," namely the garden.

chapter one, "And He saw that it was good." Furthermore, Rashi (Genesis 3:5), citing the midrash (Genesis Rabbah 19:4), explains explicitly that the snake was able to successfully tempt Eve to eat the fruit because he convinced her the fruit would make her into a creator of worlds, like God. According to this midrash, the snake even told her that God was able to create the world only because He ate from the tree.¹³ It is her very desire to make use of her God-given God-like creative quality that leads Eve to sin. Adam and Eve fail, at least in part, because that desire could not be fulfilled within the confines of the Garden of Eden.

The Category of Bein Adam La-Olam

R. Nagen's reading makes two moves. First, it clusters three pre-Sinai directives as an integrated ethic of "human-to-world": fill the earth, exercise compassionate rule over animals, and "work and guard" the garden. Second, it grounds these in *tzelem Elokim*, casting humanity as co-creators who continue God's project.

Our discussion questions the claim that Eden grounds a third category of *mitzvot*. First, The Garden of Eden experiment ended in failure. The subsequent chapters of Genesis outline further failures, with the generation of the flood, and the Tower of Babel. In the eventual Abrahamic line, the same commands are not repeated. While the *mitzvah* to populate the world is retained, the

However, the garden was already planted by God and had grown food ready to eat, leaving their actual mission unclear.

¹³ He even analogizes God to an artisan.

command to cultivate the land is not. The notion that the commands given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden nonetheless retain enduring value rests upon the assumption that the experiment was meant to be successful, and that, had they not disobeyed the command to refrain from eating from the Tree of Knowledge, humankind might have remained in the Garden for eternity. Not only must the failure in the Garden of Eden be a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience, but the underlying cause of that disobedience must be disconnected from the nature of the existence they were given there. Second, the kind of labor commanded there, *avodah*, not *melachah*, is inconsistent with the thesis that Eden exemplifies human-divine creative partnership. Third, when the Torah does authorize human creative agency as a theological ideal, it does so outside Eden.

The Garden and the Tabernacle: From Avodah to Melacha

On the reading advanced here the Garden of Eden experiment failed in part because of a misdirected yearning for *melachah*, for the evaluative wisdom and creative agency that produces in a God-like manner. Eden suppresses that drive by restricting humanity to *avodah*. Adam and Eve fail to restrain this desire, and are exiled and punished.

Crucially, in the subsequent iteration of human existence that achieves longevity, an outlet for this

creative desire is granted: the Tabernacle. The passages that describe the building of the Tabernacle celebrate human craft explicitly as *melechet machshevet*: thoughtful, designed workmanship (Exodus 35:33; 35:35; 36:1). Perhaps an underappreciated function of the building of the Tabernacle was to foster that creative desire. Although commanded by God, and with a detailed description of its contents and dimensions, the actual building process of the *mishkan* required intelligent design, as is repeatedly emphasized in the text (Exodus 31). In fact, it is fitting that according to the midrash, the appointed chief architect, Betzalel, is praised precisely for his ability to deviate appropriately from Moses's instructions (Rashi, commentary to Exodus 38:22). The Tabernacle is a human creation, one that makes use of the *tzelem Elokim*. Thus, the building of the tabernacle offered humanity the opportunity to gain closeness to God through emulating His craft as Creator¹⁴. In a sense, this is a do-over of the Garden of Eden, only with a mission that fulfills rather than suppresses the human drive for innovation.

But the Tabernacle does not only serve as a contrast to the *avodah* of the Garden of Eden. It harkens back to the creation of the world itself, functioning as its reciprocal. God employed *melachah* to fashion a world hospitable to humanity; Israel employs *melachah* to fashion a space hospitable to God within that world. What

¹⁴ The connection between the building of the Tabernacle and the Garden of Eden is further bolstered by the textual comparisons noted by R' Liebttag in his article cited above in footnote 3. He notes the unique appearance of the

cherubim in both narratives, first with respect to guarding the way back into the Garden, and subsequently the holy of holies and their appearance atop the ark of the covenant.

greater expression of the *tzelem Elokim* is there than this?

Shabbat and the Tabernacle

As inspiring as it may sound, permission to engage in *melacha* in this God-like manner, left unhinged, can potentially lead humans to minimize the distinction between them and their Creator. Enter Shabbat. In order to prevent humankind from spiralling into undisciplined feelings of Godliness, God provided a weekly reminder of our place, vis a vis Him. Shabbat serves as this reminder. The mandate to cease all *melacha* specifically removes us temporarily from the bustle of creativity, allowing a chance to reflect on our place in the universe. It is no coincidence that the Torah places its discussion of Shabbat and the building of the Tabernacle adjacent to each other (Exodus 31:12-17; 35:1-3). It is also no coincidence that the 39 prohibited *melachot* on Shabbat are patterned after the building of the Tabernacle. It is precisely the intelligent design of the Tabernacle that carries the greatest danger of blurring the boundary between person and God. Our mandate to engage in *melacha* only continues inasmuch as God allows it. As God controls when we are allowed to engage in *melacha*, the danger of the blurring of the boundary between human and God is mitigated.

Thus, the Torah establishes a tripartite relationship between the creation of the world, the Tabernacle, and Shabbat. The same *melacha* used by God to create the world is used by humans to build the Tabernacle. But as God stopped on the 7th day to reflect on His creations, we too desist from this specific type of creative work to reflect on our place in God's world. But it is not for the sake of remembering Creation that we observe Shabbat. Shabbat was not mandated to Adam and Eve even though God had already rested, and could have told them to emulate His rest every seventh day. Rather, it is the engagement in *melacha* akin to God's creation that necessitates the boundary of Shabbat.

While building the Tabernacle may be the most explicit textual example, our engagement in *melacha* in the post-Garden of Eden era extends beyond it. All forms of human innovation can be described as *melacha*¹⁵. With Shabbat's command for cessation comes the mandate to engage in such work during the week. "For six days you shall perform *melacha*..." (Exodus 34:21). The relationship is bidirectional. Observance of Shabbat brings with it the mandate to engage in all forms of human creativity during the rest of the week, and also protects against its pitfalls.

This purpose of Shabbat continues to this day.

¹⁵ Rabbi Michael Hattin (<https://www.etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-shemot/parashat-vayakhel/vayakhel-mishkan-and-shabbat-2>) suggested that the 39 *melachot* can be broken down into four categories that represent the 4 most revolutionary

discoveries in human history that did the most to advance the world. His article provided inspiration for some of the ideas in this essay.

Performance of *melacha* is not limited to building the Tabernacle. Our advancement of civilization through human innovation constitutes *melacha*,¹⁶ use of our *tzelem Elokim* and partnership with God in completing the creation of the world.¹⁷ Our mandated weekly cessation from this *melacha* ensures a frequent reminder that while we emulate God, we are not Him.

From Avodah to Melacha and Back to Avodah Again

The Tabernacle contains an additional safeguard against uncontrolled likeness to God: *avodah*. *Avodah*, with its regimented nature and theme of servitude and subservience, is the perfect antidote to undisciplined human innovation. It is no coincidence that unlike the building of the *mishkan*, in which deviation was acceptable, when it comes to the Tabernacle service, even a slight deviation can result in catastrophe.

This may also explain a perplexity pertaining to the Tabernacle that commentaries have struggled to explain. On the one hand, the building of the Tabernacle deferred to Shabbat observance. Yet, after its completion, the Tabernacle service overrides Shabbat.¹⁸ The very moment creative

authorship succeeds, it yields to regimented *avodah*. The Tabernacle service, regimented and subservient, does not require any external safeguard against human haughtiness, and thus the service does not need to yield to Shabbat.

Lastly, it is possible this concept can be traced in the text of the Torah as a progression. It is strange that, in Exodus chapter 31, the command to observe Shabbat is mentioned at the conclusion of the description of the building of the Tabernacle. In contrast, in Exodus chapter 35, observance of Shabbat is commanded first, followed by a repetition of the instructions to build the Tabernacle. This striking change in order may represent this exact progression described herein. Chapter 31 represents God's instructions to Moses, in which the nature of the *melacha* required to build the Tabernacle must first be fully elucidated, and only afterwards can the observance of Shabbat as a safeguard against the pitfalls of that *melacha* be appreciated. On the other hand, chapter 35 represents Moses's conveying of God's instructions to the people. Perhaps Moses saw an educational benefit in opening the discussion with a warning about Shabbat observance, to pre-empt the dangers that

¹⁶ While this merits its own independent analysis, I should at least make mention here of a similar pattern to be found on a national level. Abraham is promised a land on which the Israelite people will eventually build a nation. As God stewards the world, He granted us autonomy on a small piece of land, to build it into what we will. This process of nation-building thus constitutes God-like *melacha* on a societal level. It is striking that it, too, is therefore limited by the boundary of *shemittah*, which the Torah also calls Shabbat.

¹⁷ See Netziv's Ha'amek Davar commentary to [Genesis 2:3](#) where he states that humans are commanded to bring glory to God by releasing the forces of nature contained in all creation. The thrust of the Netziv supports the notion that part of human purpose is to bring completion to creation by actualizing the potential that God implanted in the world to lead to its gradual advancement.

¹⁸ See commentary of Meshech Chochma to [Exodus 35:2](#).

Shabbat is to protect against. In other words, Moses chooses to frame his discussion of the *melacha* used to build the Tabernacle in the context of Shabbat so that from the start the pitfall of the task at hand is minimized.¹⁹

Conclusion

The very type of “work” assigned in Eden points away from human creative partnership and toward regulated service. Eden assigns *avodah* to caretakers; it does not commission *melachah* to co-creators. Adam and Eve failed in the Garden in part because they could not control their desire to express their *tzelem Elokim* by performing creative craftsmanship akin to God’s creation of the world. Only later does the Torah open the path, through the Tabernacle’s artisanship and the converse to Shabbat’s prohibitions, to *melacha*, as the calibrated expression of human creativity in the image of God. God’s creation of a space for us in the universe mirrors our creation of a space for Him in our world. Because of the potential for this reciprocity to foster a blurring of the boundaries between God and humankind, Shabbat is introduced as a safeguard, reminding us that *melacha* is only permitted to us when God allows. The corollary to Shabbat is the six days of *melacha* of the work week, where the mandate to do *melacha* is expanded from the *mishkan* to all forms of human innovation, such that humans can truly partner with God in completing Creation through advancement of the world. In this way, the tripartite relationship between the

Tabernacle, Shabbat, and the creation of the world is a contrast to the commands given in the Garden of Eden, and serves as a God-given opportunity to partner with Him, expressing our *tzelem Elokim* to become co-creators of the world.

Managing Editor:

David Kollmar

Editors:

David Fried

Shayna Herzage-Feldan

Chesky Kopel

Tamar Ron Marvin

Chaya Sara Oppenheim

Michael Weiner

Consulting Editors:

Miriam Krupka Berger

Michael Bernstein

Elli Fischer

Miriam Gedwiser

Yosef Lindell

Chaim Saiman

Jeffrey Saks

Jacob J. Schacter

Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld

Shlomo Zuckier

Please contact us at editors@thelehrhaus.com

¹⁹ See Meshech Chochma and Kli Yakar to Exodus 35:2 who offer different explanations to this question.