



Vayakhel-P'kudei **BLACK SABBATH**

We were walking down the long airport corridor on the way to the boarding gate. Somehow, it seems that whenever my wife and I have a flight to catch, anywhere, our gate is always at the furthest end of the long hall. We had plenty of time until the airplane departed, but somehow I experience an urgent need to rush whenever I am in an airport, and so we were in a hurry.

There was a couple coming toward us, equally hurried. At first, they didn't even come into focus for me. They were just anonymous faces in a crowded hallway. As they came closer, there was something vaguely familiar about them. I turned to my wife and said, "Don't we know those people from somewhere?" "I don't think so", she responded, "but they resemble the Goldblatts."

As we came still closer to each other, we realized that indeed they were the Goldblatts, but a twenty years older version of the Goldblatts we knew. Of course, we were a twenty years older version

too, so it was no wonder that they didn't recognize us either.

But soon we were face-to-face, and the intervening years vanished, and the good memories resurfaced. We all slowed down our rushed pace and took some time to reconnect with each other.

"We can never forget", exclaimed Mrs. Goldblatt, "the Friday night that you had us over for a Shabbat meal. What we remember most was the light - the candles, the chandelier, and the standing lamps in the corner. They made the entire dining room glow."

"Yes indeed," agreed her husband. "Real light and spiritual light; real warmth and the warmth of friendship."

I first met Mrs. Goldblatt in a professional context. She was the administrator of a large social services agency where I consulted. She was, to say the least, not a religiously observant Jew. But when her mother passed away, my wife and I paid her a condolence call. She did not "sit shiva" in any traditional sense, but let her friends and acquaintances know that she was home for the weekend and accepting condolences.

At that visit, we learned about her background. Her parents had been ardent communists, and in fact her father was the last editor of a once

famous Jewish communist newspaper. She made it clear that she shared her father's atheistic vision as well as his social ideals. Her husband's weltanschauung was not very different from hers.

As we left her house, my wife and I uttered the same words to each other: "We must have them over for a Shabbat meal!" And so we did.

Now do not think for a moment that I am about to relate some wonderful story of a religious transformation. Quite the contrary. The Goldblatts came to our home one Friday night, we had a stimulating conversation, good food, and our kids behaved themselves. And then we went our separate ways, occasionally exchanging greeting cards over the years, but no more. As far as we knew, they remained religiously indifferent.

Until that encounter in the airport corridor, it was then that we learned how much of an impression that Shabbat dinner made upon them, and about how that one evening had changed their attitude toward Judaism. And of all the things that they remembered, it was the light and warmth that they remembered most.

When we were finally on our flight, I had time to think, and I found myself reflecting upon a verse in this week's double Torah portion, Vayakhel-P'kudei (Sh'mot 35:1-

40:38). The verse occurs very near the beginning of the parsha and reads "...On the seventh day you shall have a Shabbat of complete rest, holy to the Lord... You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the Shabbat day."

Two classic Jewish thinkers, neither of whom I mention frequently in this column, speak about this verse and its interpretation by an ancient sect of the Jewish people, the Karaites. This group denied that there was any interpretation possible of the Bible except a literal one. They claim that there was no such thing as an Oral Law and rebelled against rabbinic tradition.

This sect persisted for many centuries and was persecuted, along with mainstream Jews, by our enemies throughout history. I have heard tell that there are still remnants of that sect in Israel and the Balkan countries.

But all I know about the Karaites is what I have read in the works of the great Jewish philosopher, Saadia Gaon, and in the biblical commentary of Abraham Ibn Ezra. Both of these sages see our verse and its interpretation as one of the major differences between traditional rabbinic Jews and the Karaite sectarians.

The rabbis understood this verse

to mean that one could not kindle fire on Shabbat, and that cooking was prohibited on that day. But they go into great detail about how to prepare in advance stoves and lamps that will heat and illuminate our homes and keep our Shabbat foods warm throughout the Shabbat day.

The Karaites understood the verse quite differently. "You shall kindle no fire..." meant, for them, that all fires had to be extinguished before sunset on Friday, and that the home had to remain dark and cold. They would partake of no warm food for the entire day.

Their Shabbat was darker still. They forbade intimate relations between husband and wife on the Shabbat, and they insisted that the biblical verse which enjoins us to remain in our places on Shabbat was also to be taken literally. So they left their homes only to attend their houses of prayer, but not even to visit family and friends.

How different is the Shabbat prescribed by our rabbinical sages. They insist that our homes be well lit, and to this day we are careful to include at least one hot portion of food in our Shabbat day meal as a statement against the Karaite heresy.

The Goldblatts (this, of course, is not their real name) remain to this day as ignorant of rabbinic Judaism as I am of the Karaite version

of our faith. But their one visit to our Shabbat table was sufficient to dispel their previous notion of Shabbat as a day of darkness and despondency. They learned that the Shabbat home is a home of warmth and light, and that Shabbat is indeed a gift from the Almighty's special treasury.

My family and I are proud that we were able to create a Shabbat environment on that Friday night long ago which could teach that lesson to our dear and respected friends, the Goldblatts.

Would that each of us, less observant or more so, would create such a Shabbat environment this Friday night and for every Friday night for the rest of our lives. May we all bask in the glowing light and loving warmth of Shabbat this week as we read Vayakhel and P'kudei. 🕯️