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Parshat Pekudei

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DIRE PRECAUTIONS

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Most building dedications are joyous events filled with upbeat speeches and predictions of growth and unyielding expansion. This week, Moshe recaps and reckons all the labor and material that went into the building of the Mishkan. He proudly announces that the contributions of gold, silver, copper and other materials, brought by the children of Israel exceeded the demands. Yet there is one aspect of his inaugural address that is strikingly somber. Instead of declaring that the Mishkan is here to stay and will be the forerunner of the Temple, he begins with a foreboding sense of doom.

The portion of Pekudei (Reckoning) begins in Exodus 38:21 “These are the reckoning of the Mishkan — the Mishkan of testimony.” The Medrash is bothered by Moshe’s repetitive expression. Why does he repeat the words Mishkan — Mishkan? He should have said, “These are the reckoning of the Mishkan of testimony.”? The Medrash answers, homiletically, that the word Mishkan has a close relative in the word Mashkon — collateral. Moshe was alluding, “to the two Temples that were taken back by G-d as collateral for the sins of Israel.”

Why on opening day, does Moshe allude to impending doom? Wouldn’t such talk be totally demoralizing? What lesson is there for the Jewish People?

In Poland there was a group of smugglers that employed many devious schemes to get goods across the Russian border without paying taxes. Yet, they were not successful until they realized that the border guards never bothered funeral processions. The smugglers decided to load their wares into coffins, and with all the grief and anguish that accompanies a funeral they carried the contraband across the border. As this ritual became the norm, the fabricated anguish of a funeral procession was abandoned. One dark night, the group, laughing and kibitzing, came to the border. The guards, noticing an unusually buoyant atmosphere, demanded to open the casket. Upon seeing the illegal goods, the guards immediately arrested the group and brought them to police headquarters for interrogation. The leader of the smugglers stood before the commanding officer and broke down in tears. “Have mercy upon us. We all have families!” he wailed. With rage in his eyes the officer responded. “You fool! You are crying now! Had you cried as you reached the border, you surely would be laughing now. It is because you laughed then that you are crying now!”

Moshe injected a sense of seriousness into the joy of dedication. He warns the Jewish people at this celebration that even the greatest gifts are not permanent. Even the Mishkan will not last forever. We must have that sense of seriousness and appreciation relating to everything we cherish. The prophet (Yoel 2:13) tells us, “rend your heart and not your clothing.” The sages explain those words as saying “if you rend your hearts, you will not have to rend your clothing.” Moshe, in a very subtle way, sends the same message. Even at a wedding, as the groom smashes the glass under the canopy, he reminds himself, his bride, and all those gathered of Moshe’s inaugural message. Cherish what you have and guard it dearly. Because nothing left unguarded lasts forever.

The Value of the Tabernacle

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

"These are the reckonings of the Tabernacle, the Tabernacle of Testimony, which was reckoned at Moses' bidding. The labor of the Levites was under the authority of Itamar, son of Aaron the Priest. Betzalel, son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, did everything that God commanded Moses."

The Torah portion begins with a brief description of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) and the people who were involved in its construction and service. The Sefforno writes that the Torah is teaching us a significant point with this introduction.

The *Mishkan* and its accessories were never destroyed, captured or desecrated. In contrast, both the Temples were subject to desecration and destruction. The Sefforno explains that the first two verses in the Portion are giving four reasons behind the elevated nature of the *Mishkan*. The first is in the words; "the Tabernacle of Testimony". This, the Sefforno explains refers to the two Tablets that Moses received on Mount Sinai. These are indicative of the incredible spirituality that dwelt in the Tabernacle. The verse continues; "which was reckoned at Moses' bidding." Since Moses arranged the building of the *Mishkan*, it benefitted from his personal majesty. The third aspect contributing to the holiness of the *Mishkan* was that, "the labor of the Levites was under the authority of Itamar". Itamar was also a man of great stature. And finally, the second verse informs us that Betzalel, also a great man, with great lineage, built the *Mishkan*.

The Sefforno then contrasts this with the people involved in the building of the Temples. The first Temple was arranged by the righteous King Solomon, however, the workers were non-Jews from Tsur. Since the Temple was not built by righteous people, it was subject to corrosion and therefore needed to be maintained, unlike the Tabernacle. Moreover, because of its lower level of holiness it did ultimately fall into the hands of our enemies and was destroyed. The second Temple was of an even lower level of holiness; the Tablets were not there, and it was arranged by Cyrus, the Persian King. Accordingly, it too fell afoul of our enemies and was destroyed.

Three verses later, the Torah tells us the total value of all the jewelry that was given for the building of the Tabernacle. The Sefforno on this verse, continuing in his theme from the earlier verses, notes that the total material value of the Tabernacle was far less than that of both Temples, both of which were incredibly beautiful and expensive buildings. And yet, unlike the Temples, the humble Tabernacle continually had the Divine Presence within it. The Sefforno concludes that this teaches us that the holiness of a building is not defined by its material value and beauty, rather by the spiritual level of the people who were involved in its construction. In a similar vein, the explanation of the Sefforno teaches us that the Torah outlook attributes true value towards physical objects or buildings in a very different way to that of the secular outlook. In the secular world, the external beauty or material value of the item define its 'value'. In contrast, the Torah pays little heed to the external qualities rather the internal spirituality that was invested into the item determines its true value. Thus, the Tabernacle may have been far less physically impressive than the two Temples but its true value was far greater because of the intentions of the people who made it.

This concept is demonstrated by an interesting incident with regard to the Tabernacle that is described in Parshas Terumah and Vayakhel. God instructs Moses to tell the people to bring the raw materials necessary in order to build the *Mishkan*. "This is the portion that you shall take from them: gold, silver, and copper; and turquoise, purple and scarlet wool; linen and goat hair; red-dyed ram skins; tachash skins, acacia wood; oil for illumination, spices for the anointment oil and the aromatic incense; **shoham stones and stones for the settings**, for the Ephod and Breastplate." The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh points out that the order of the materials mentioned is difficult to understand; the shoham stones and the 'stones of the settings' are the most valuable of all the items in the list, therefore logically they should have been mentioned first.

He offers an answer based on the Gemara that informs us how the people attained the shoham stones. The Gemara says that a great miracle occurred and shoham stones came down along with the manna. The Princes then donated these precious stones to the *Mishkan*. One may think that the supernatural manner in which the stones came down would only add to their inherent material value. However, the Ohr HaChaim writes the exact opposite; since the stones came without any effort or financial loss, they are placed at the end of the list of items donated to the *Mishkan*. When the people gave all the other items, they were parting with their property and willingly undergoing financial loss for the sake of doing God's will. This places those items, including such mundane material as goat hair, on a higher level than the precious shoham stones that came through a miracle. This starkly demonstrates the Torah's value system with regard to the physical world. External factors are completely subjugated to the internal - the intentions that went into the item determine its true value.

This concept has applications in Jewish law. The authorities discuss the status of an esrog that has been bruised by over-use. The Chatam Sofer rules that if the bruises came about because many people fulfilled the mitzvah of shaking the four species with this esrog, then it is kosher. He writes further that the fact that the bruises came about through mitzvot actually enhances its status, and constitutes a kind of *hiddur* (beautification) in and of itself. This Chatam Sofer teaches us a very telling lesson. When a person would see a beautiful, clean esrog that had never been used, and compares it to a bruised esrog that had been shaken by hundreds of people, he would consider the clean esrog to be of greater value. However, the Torah focuses far more

on the internal value behind the esrog, than on its external beauty. In a similar vein, a man's hat once became very dirty on Shabbat. He asked the Chazon Ish if he could clean it on Shabbat. The Chazon Ish answered that it was forbidden, but the man argued that it is not *Kavod Shabbat* (the honor of Shabbat) to go around with a dirty hat. The Chazon Ish answered that since the hat is left dirty in honor of the sanctity of Shabbat, in this case, keeping it dirty constitutes honoring the Shabbat itself. Again, one may think that a dirty hat cheapens Shabbat due to its unkempt appearance, however, in truth the intentions that lay behind the dirt can turn this into a way of greatly honoring Shabbos!

We have seen how the Torah's criterion for defining the true 'value' of the physical world is very different from that of the Western world. The effort, *kavannah* (intentions) and spiritual input into that item are the true determinants of its objective value, as opposed to its superficial appearance or monetary value. There is a very natural tendency for a person to focus on the externalities of the physical world, including the size of a house, the appearance of a car, and so on. The sources above teach us that the Torah focuses on the internal.

We Toil and Receive Reward — For the Toil!

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Pikudei concludes the construction of the Mishkan. After the construction of all the individual components of the Mishkan, the parts were brought to Moshe. Rashi quotes the Medrash Tanchuma which explains that the reason why the Mishkan was brought to Moshe was because everyone else was unable to assemble it. The Mishkan was simply too heavy for anyone to lift. Since Moshe had not been personally involved in any part of the construction of the Mishkan, HaShem [G-d] reserved the privilege of final assembly for him.

When HaShem told Moshe to assemble the Mishkan, Moshe protested that it was too heavy for him to lift as well. HaShem told Moshe to make the effort. "Make it look like you are trying to erect it." Moshe made the effort and miraculously, it was assembled by itself. Since Moshe made the effort, he received the credit for having put it up. Rav Meir Rubman explains that we can learn a very important insight regarding spirituality from this Medrash. The Medrash teaches us that regardless of the difficulty of the task, we must make the effort. In other areas of endeavor, a person is only given credit for producing. However, when it comes to Judaism, HaShem is not necessarily interested in results; He is interested in the effort.

The concept that a person receives an "A" for effort is usually a backhanded compliment. In actuality, you received a "D", a near failing grade, but at least you received an "A" for effort. That is the way it is in other areas of life. But regarding Mitzvos, Hashem merely asks that we make the effort. Whether the task is actually accomplished or not is often out of our control and up to Hashem.

When we conclude a Mesechta (tractate of the Talmud), we say the prayer "We toil and they toil. We toil and receive reward and they toil and do not receive reward." What does it mean "they toil and do not receive reward"? This does not seem to be a true statement. People do not work without receiving payment!

The answer is that when we work (at religious tasks), we are paid for the effort, regardless of whether or not we produce. But 'they' are only paid for the bottom line. In all other areas of endeavor, toil that does not produce results does not receive reward.

Not long ago, I was in Atlanta for a Torah retreat. Atlanta is an amazing community. Thirty years ago, they did not have a minyan of Sabbath observers. Not so many years later, over 300 people were coming to shul on Shabbos—all of them are in some stage of having intensified, and intensifying, their observance of mitzvos.

I asked Rabbi Emanuel Feldman (Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Beth Jacob in Atlanta), "What is the key to your success?" Rabbi Feldman told me that the key is to try to plant seeds. That is all a Rabbi can do. He can try to nurture and water the seeds, but really all he can do is try. He never knows for sure whether or not it will work.

For example, one individual who recently returned to intensive Jewish involvement and observance told Rabbi Feldman that he made his decision because of a Yom Kippur sermon that Rabbi Feldman delivered fifteen years earlier. A comment in that sermon had struck home. He did not act upon it then, but fifteen years later he decided to become religious.

Success is not what it's all about. Kiruv Rechokim is about effort. Whether or not the Mishkan is actually erected is HaShem's worry. We toil and we receive reward—for the effort.

“These are the reckonings of the Tabernacle, the Tabernacle of Testimony, which were reckoned at Moshe's bidding; the labor of the Levites was under the authority of Isamar, son of Aharon the Kohen” (38:21)

In his sefer Darash Moshe, R' Moshe Feinstein writes that we can learn an important lesson from Moshe's reckoning of all the materials used in the construction of the Mishkan. A person has to give an accounting for everything that Hashem gives him. Moshe knew that he was responsible to show the people how he used their gifts. Likewise, a person must recognize that everything that he has in this world is a gift from Hashem and he should feel obligated to keep an account of how he has used them. A person must assess whether he is using what Hashem has given him to its fullest. Every gift from Hashem is a responsibility and a challenge and must be used in the right way. This includes all gifts from Hashem: physical possessions, unique talents, intelligence, health, and most importantly, but often overlooked, time. One is only granted a finite number of years in this world and he should treat every moment as a precious gift from Hashem. He should maximize his time and not waste any of it. In the Shaar Hazechira ("Gate of Remembrance," Chapter 19) of the Orchos Tzadikim, the author lists thirty things that a person should constantly remember. One of them is to remember to use his time wisely. He writes: "One must remember that he saw in his days men who were younger and stronger than he, who were greatly enjoying their lives, but did not live long. Death cannot be impeded from coming at any hour and man has no control over it. One must remember that his soul is lent to him as a pledge and one has no idea when the Owner will come and claim His pledge. Should one not hasten to cleanse the pledge to return it as clean as it came to him?" (No. 16)

“All the gold that was used for the work – for all the holy work – the offered-up gold was twenty-nine talents and seven hundred thirty shekels in the sacred shekel” (38:24)

The Seforno says that with this calculation, the Torah "testifies that the amount of gold, silver and copper that was gathered for the construction of the Mishkan was a very small amount compared to the wealth of the first Bais HaMikdash and certainly compared to the one built by Herod, which was even more lavish. Despite all this, the Divine Presence was stronger in the Mishkan of Moshe than in the first Bais HaMikdash and was non-existent in the second Bais HaMikdash. With this, the Torah teaches that the extravagance and size of the edifice are not the cause for the presence of the Shechina among the Jewish people. Rather, Hashem favors those who fear Him and their deeds to dwell among them." A shul or bais medrash may look beautiful, but the sanctity is only found in these nice buildings because of the actions of the people inside of them. This is not in any way meant to negate the importance of beautifying the places where we learn and pray. However, we must keep our priorities straight and understand the true source of the sanctity that fills these special places.

“And he put them upon the shoulder straps of the ephod [as] stones of remembrance for the Children of Israel, as Hashem had commanded Moshe” (39:7)

The Meshech Chochma points out that the posuk describes the stones of remembrance on the ephod served as "a reminder to the Jewish people," not to Hashem. The names of the tribes were inscribed on stones worn by the Kohen Gadol so that when the people would remember that their names were involved in the service before Hashem, they would be ashamed to sin. The stones on the ephod had actually already served a deterrent against sinning centuries earlier. The Gemara in Sotah 36b says that when Yosef was about to give in to the temptation to be with the wife of Potiphar, he saw a vision of his father Yaakov, who told him that if he sinned, his name would not be among those of his brothers on the ephod. One who realizes that his name resides in such a special place is embarrassed to sin. Wherever we are, we are always in the presence of Hashem. If we remember this, it will prevent us from sinning because we will be ashamed to be seen by Hashem. In the famous words of the Rema (Orach Chaim 1:1): "I place Hashem before me always - this is an important rule in the Torah and among the levels of the righteous who walk before Hashem. The way one sits, moves and acts when he is alone is not the way he sits, moves and acts when he is before a great king... Certainly when a person remembers that Hashem, the great King Whose glory fills the entire world, is standing over him and sees his actions... Immediately fear and humility will seize him in his trepidation before Hashem and his shame before Him."

“He placed the menorah in the Tent of Meeting, opposite the table, on the southern side of the Mishkan” (40:24)

The Menorah represents the light of Torah, showing us the way throughout our lives. The Shulchan symbolizes our food, the everyday sustenance that we need. The Menorah was intentionally placed directly opposite the Shulchan because one always has to ensure that his finances are kosher. The light of Torah must always be facing one's business matters to ensure their compliance with Torah values. Religion and business do intersect. A person has to conduct himself in business honestly and appropriately. There is a full section of Shulchan Aruch that deals with business issues and other money matters because the Torah also shows us how to act in business

by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

“All the work of the Communion Tent Tabernacle was then completed.... They brought the Tabernacle to Moses” (Ex. 39:32-33)

Rashi explains: “Nobody was able to set it up because of the weight of the boards which no human strength was capable of setting up on end. Moses, however, succeeded in placing it in position. Moses said to G-d: ‘How is its erection possible by human beings?’ G-d answered him: ‘You do your part with your hand!’ He appeared to be erecting it, but in fact it set itself on end and rose of its own accord. This is why the Torah says, ‘The tabernacle was erected’ (40:17). It was erected by itself’.

It was erected by itself; in other words, with G-d’s assistance. Indeed, man’s strength is limited. Sometimes he faces formidable tasks that are as hard to carry out as the Tabernacle boards were to lift up. Yet let him not despair. We also have to take into account that G-d assists us. Our rule of thumb is that “if someone sanctifies himself a little bit, doing whatever he is capable of by his own efforts, G-d will sanctify him greatly, providing him with divine assistance” (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato in Mesilat Yesharim, Midat HaKedushah).

Today, ours is the generation of the reestablishment of our national home, the ingathering of the exiles and the consolidation of our hold on the land of our life’s blood. This era is fraught with difficulties, complications, struggles and wars. Sometimes we face harsh, complicated challenges affecting our survival, our security and our economic welfare. No less difficult are the tasks we face in the social and spiritual realm, like imbuing the People of Israel with Jewish tradition, or the unity of our people. Let us not despair. Quite the contrary, we must strive and struggle, and G-d will then help us. We will erect the “heavy Tabernacle boards” of our Jewish State, and we will then enjoy the blessing of Moses when he erected the Tabernacle, that the Divine Presence will come to rest upon our handiwork.

By Rabbi Dov Begon

Accountability

By Rabbi Berel Wein

The book of Shemot concludes with a key message for Jews – accountability. The Torah records for us how the Mishkan was actually built and then it records for us a detailed accounting of how the donations for its building were actually spent and accounted for. The Torah holds Bezalel and Ahaliav accountable for their talents and industry. Their actual efforts and final accomplishments are compared to the original plans for the Mishkan as detailed to us in parshiyot Trumah and Tetzaveh.

The praise for the architects, supervisors and builders of the Mishkan is that they did not deviate from the original plans and fulfilled their tasks completely and enthusiastically – with a full heart and great commitment. They fulfilled their obligation of accountability to God and man.

There can be no greater accomplishment for a human being than fulfilling that obligation of accountability. It disciplines our minds and our behavior and creates a responsible and secure society. Much of the Jewish world today says openly or subliminally: “Don’t count on me.” People do not want to commit themselves to marriage, to ideals, to the Torah or the Jewish people. They do not want to engage with the test of accountability so they avoid the issue completely.

The Jewish future cannot be built on people who do not wish to be held accountable for the use of their lives, their talents and their material blessings. That is really the most important message that these parshiyot impart to us. And make no mistake about it, Judaism holds all human beings accountable in an exact fashion. The Torah also holds Moshe accountable for the materials that were collected in order to construct the Mishkan. Every item that was donated has to be accounted for. The story is told about a bookkeeper for a certain company that was unable to balance the books of the company. He was off by five dollars. So he simply left a five dollar bill in the ledger and went home. That type of accounting is not acceptable when it comes to dealing with public funds.

Moshe feels compelled to account for every piece of silver donated to the construction of the Mishkan. And when he finds the books don’t balance, he is terror stricken until he remembers that the missing amount of silver was used to manufacture the hooks that held the curtains of the Mishkan upright and taut. Only then is he relieved and his leadership role is again justified and secure. A leader, more than the average person or simple citizen, is held to the highest possible standard of fiscal and moral accountability. The Bible records for us how the kings of Judah and Israel were continually reminded and often chastised by the prophets of their times for failing this test of responsible accountability. The Torah states the matter succinctly: “And you shall be found innocent and blameless before God and Israel.”

The Torah demands accountability and is loath to accept excuses. A generation that does not feel itself accountable to the Jewish past and to the Jewish future fails miserably in its role as being the conduit of Jewish life and holiness.

Clouds, From Both Sides

by Rabbi Ari Kahn

As the book of Shmot draws to an end, a cloud envelops and fills the newly completed Mishkan. In a general sense, we understand that this is what makes the Mishkan operational:

The **cloud** covered the Tent of Meeting, and God's glory filled the Mishkan. Moshe could not come into the Tent of Meeting because the **cloud** rested on it and God's glory filled the Mishkan. [Later], when [God] raised the **cloud** up from the Mishkan, it [would be a signal] for the Israelites to move on, [and this was true] in all their travels. When the **cloud** did not rise, they would not move on, [waiting] until the day it did. God's **cloud** would remain on the Mishkan by day, and fire was in it by night. This was visible to the entire House of Israel, in all their travels. (Shmot 40:34-38)

What is the significance of this cloud? Although we may not have paid proper attention to it, we have seen this cloud but not really focused on it throughout the entire book of Shmot; we might say that the cloud has been a major subtext. Thus, when the Jews first left Egypt, the cloud accompanied them:

God went before them by day with a pillar of **cloud**, to guide them along the way. By night it appeared as a pillar of fire, providing them with light. They could thus travel day and night. The pillar of **cloud** by day and the pillar of fire at night never left [their position] in front of the people. (Shmot 13:21-22)

Always present, always in the background; like a vigilant mother, the cloud had been watching over them, protecting them. Although we generally think of clouds as ethereal, as a bit of heaven, the cloud had been their constant companion in a very real sense, separating between their camp and the Egyptian army, leading them through the sea, showing them the way forward. In a similarly "real" sense, when the time came for the Revelation at Sinai, God descended to earth, as it were, and appeared on the mountain in a cloud:

God said to Moshe, 'I will come to you in a thick **cloud**, so that all the people will hear when I speak to you. They will then believe in you forever.' (Shmot 19:9)

When Moshe was invited to ascend Mount Sinai to receive the Tablets, he climbed heavenward, making his way through the cloud:

As Moshe climbed the mountain, the **cloud** covered the mountain. God's glory rested on Mount Sinai, and it was covered by the **cloud** for six days. On the seventh day, He called to Moshe from the midst of the **cloud**. To the Israelites, the appearance of God's glory on the mountain top was like a devouring flame. Moshe went into the **cloud**, and climbed to the mountain top. Moshe remained on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. (Shmot 24:15-18)

These verses, describing the Revelation, bear a striking resemblance to the verses at the end of the book of Shmot that describe the completion of the Mishkan. Perhaps by considering the similarities between these two sets of verses, we may gain a better understanding of the final chord sounded as Shmot comes to an end, and, as a result, of the Mishkan itself.

The key, it seems, is the cloud: According to tradition, the protective cloud that had accompanied the Israelites out of Egypt dissipated when the people worshipped the golden calf. This seems to represent a strange, stern quid pro quo: The people were confused; they felt vulnerable and abandoned due to Moshe's absence, and they failed to appreciate that God's Presence was still very much with them in the form of the protective cloud. And because they turned a blind eye toward the ever-present manifestation of God, taking the cloud for granted, it was taken from them. This is the price to be paid for not appreciating God's protection: The protection is revoked. The cloud vanishes.

In the aftermath of the sin, Moshe prays for forgiveness on behalf of the nation. He pleads that God's presence return and dwell among the people. Moshe goes so far as to say that if God is not in their midst He may as well not go through the motions of allowing the Jews to continue their journey to the Promised Land (Shmot 33:15-16). Moshe understood that without God in their midst, their efforts would be futile, meaningless.

This, then, is the true significance of the final verses of Shmot: The cloud has returned. For the first time, the people are granted a clear sign that the sin perpetrated at the foot of the mountain, the sin that had banished the cloud, has been forgiven. The cloud expresses the rekindled intimacy between the Jewish People and God. Now that they are once again granted protection and guidance, they are able to move on, both spiritually and geographically, continuing their quest to create a holy society in the Holy Land.