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Parshat Vayakel - Parah

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FOCAL POINTS

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

The commands for the building of the Mishkan were fully meted. The job was winding down, and this week in Parshas Vayakhel Moshe instructs the nation with the final directives of the monumental task. First, however, he has a message. The portion begins telling us that Moshe gathered the nation and told them that “six days you shall work and the seventh day shall be holy – you shall not kindle fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day” (Exodus 35:1-2). Only then does he continue with the directives that pertain to the erection of the Mishkan.

The strange juxtaposition of the laws of Shabbos in the midst of all the instructions of building a sanctuary is cause for concern. That is why our sages explain that Moshe was informing the Jewish people that despite its importance building a Mishkan does not pre-empt the Sabbath. All work must cease on Shabbos regardless of how it may impact the progress of the Mishkan.

Yet what must be analyzed are the seemingly disconnected verses. Why didn’t the Torah tell us of Shabbos’ power in a straightforward way, by openly directing the nation “thou shall not construct the Mishkan on the Shabbos.” Why juxtapose Shabbos as a stand-alone unit, leaving us to infer its overriding power through scriptural juxtaposition? In fact the words “you shall not kindle fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath” make the command seem totally irrelevant to Mishkan per se and applicable to each and every individual homemaker. If so, the command truly seems out of place. It seems that regardless of its relation to the laws of construction, the theme of Shabbos plays a greater role vis-a-vis the Mishkan. What is it?

A famous Magid was asked to lecture in a prosperous and modern city. Before he was to speak he was told to consult with the synagogue’s president. “This is a very distinguished community,” he was told “and we must be careful. We surely would not want to offend anyone with, even the slightest rebuke.” The Magid met the president who was sitting in a richly upholstered leather armchair behind a mahogany desk. As the Magid entered, the man rested his lit cigar on the corner of a brass ashtray. “Rabbi,” asked the president, “you have a reputation as a remarkable speaker. One who inspires crowds and makes – might I say – waves. Pray tell me,” he continued “what are you intending to speak about in our town?” The Magid promptly replied, “I intend to talk about Shabbat observance.” The president’s face turned crimson. “Oh no dear rabbi, please. In this town, such talk will fall on deaf ears. We all struggle to make a living and Shabbos is just not in the cards. I implore you. Talk about something else.” The rabbi pondered. “Perhaps I should talk about kashrut.” “Kashrut? Please,” begged the president, “don’t waste your time. There hasn’t been a kosher butcher in this town for years.” “How about tzedaka?” offered the Magid. “Charity? Give us a break. Do you know how many shnorriers visit this town each week. We are sick of hearing about charity!” Meekly the Magid made another suggestion. “Tefillah? (prayer)” “Please. In a city of 1,000 Jewish families, we hardly get a weekday minyan. The synagogue is never filled except on the High Holy Days. No one would be interested.” Finally the Magid became frustrated. “If I can’t talk about Shabbos, and I can’t talk about tzedaka, and I cannot discuss kashrut, what do you want me to talk about?” The president looked amazed. “Why, rabbi” exclaimed the president. “That’s easy! Talk about Judaism!”

By placing the concept of Shabbos in general, and one of its detailed laws in particular, smack in the middle of the architectural directives of a most glorious edifice, the Torah was telling us that although we may build beautiful palaces in which to serve the Almighty, however, if we forget the tenets of our faith, those great structures are meaningless. Shabbos was mentioned as a separate unit because its relevance is even greater than its ability to halt construction. A Jew must remember that without Shabbos, without kashrut, without tefillah, a beautiful sanctuary is no more enduring than a castle in the air.

Will It and It Shall Be

by Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis

"Every man whose heart inspired him came; and everyone whose spirit motivated him brought the portion of Hashem for the work of the Tent of the Meeting, for all its labor and for the sacred vestments." (Exodus 35:21)

The previous *parshiyos* have dealt with the construction of the Tabernacle and all the various vessels and furnishings therein. God commissioned these articles with specific measurements and designs, and the people were responsible for their execution. The question that must occur to all of us is how it was possible for a nation of slaves who for generations had been in bondage, and who had no artisans among them, to create such an intricate and magnificent structure as the Tabernacle. Where did they gain the know-how and the experience?

The answer is to be found in this *parashah*: "Every man whose heart inspired him came...." If we truly desire to fulfill the will of God, if our hearts burn with fervor for His sake, then God will remove all obstacles from our paths, and enable us to achieve the impossible. We have an enormous power within ourselves of which we are not even aware, and that is faith. Indeed, if we have faith in our Heavenly Father and seek to fulfill His will, He will enable us to tap energies and abilities that we didn't even know we possessed. We need only act upon our dreams and they may well become reality.

We see this throughout history. Consider Batya, the daughter of Pharaoh, who went to the Nile to bathe. She saw the basket in which the infant Moses was hidden, floating in the water. She attempted to save him, but her arms couldn't reach the basket. Nevertheless, she extended her hand, and when God beheld her genuine yearning to save the infant's life, He miraculously allowed her arms to extend and bring the basket to shore.

In the days of King Saul, the malevolent Philistine giant Goliath came to menace the Jewish people. The nation froze in terror. King Saul offered his personal armor to anyone who would battle the monster, but no one had the courage to take up the challenge except David, the young shepherd. Saul was much taller than David, and it was ludicrous to imagine that he could wear Saul's armor, but miraculously, when David donned that armor, it fit like a glove! There are many more such examples, but the teaching that we must absorb is that if our hearts soar with faith and love of God - if we truly desire to serve Him - miracles can take place and God will enable us to achieve that which only yesterday appeared impossible. Let us never feel intimidated when undertaking mitzvot. If we truly desire it, God can give us wings to soar and energy to accomplish our task.

Self-Transformation Through Torah

by Rabbi Avraham Kovel

Ten years ago, in 2015, my closest friend from college - a brilliant chemist who'd been published in scientific journals and recruited straight from graduation to a prestigious position at the CDC - became an observant Jew almost overnight. His scientific mind had always matched his spiritual curiosity, but this dramatic shift in his life's direction caught me completely off guard. But I valued our friendship and continued to visit him and talk about his new spiritual path.

During our conversations, he shared Jewish ideas that both intrigued and challenged me. The story of Abraham, my Hebrew namesake, who stood against the world fighting for truth, resonated deeply - especially as I had begun developing my own relationship with God.

Before he left to study Torah in Israel, he invited me to experience a Shabbat with him. Though his religious observance puzzled me, I accepted his invitation. That Shabbat opened my eyes to something new - 25 hours without technology, without work, without distractions.

Six months later, in the midst of the painful end of a tumultuous relationship, I found myself drawn back to that experience of peace and disconnection. I decided to go to synagogue for Friday night services for the first time since my Bar Mitzvah, 13 years ago.

Our timing couldn't have been worse - my parents and I arrived just as they were locking the doors. But as we drove home that night, something prompted me to play an English recording of the weekly Torah portion:

"And Moses assembled all the Children of Israel and said to them... 'Take from yourselves gifts to God, everyone whose heart is inspired, and bring them as a gift to God, gold, silver...' And everyone whose heart was inspired came and brought God's offerings for the work of the Tabernacle... and the artisans said to Moses, 'The people are bringing more than what is needed!'... Moses thereupon proclaimed: 'Let no man or woman make further effort toward gifts for the *Mishkan*!' So the people were restrained from bringing" (Excerpts from Parshas Vayakhel).

Amidst a Torah portion full of technical building details, I found inspiration in these passages: "Look at the passion with which the Jewish people gave to build a House for God!" I exclaimed. "They were overwhelmed with such a desire to connect to Him that their giving overflowed to the point where they had to be restrained from giving more!"

That night, I took my first step toward Jewish observance - turning off my phone for Shabbat. Over the next year, my life changed rapidly. Only weeks after that first Shabbat, I traveled to Israel, where I began to see the value in my religion for the first time. I redirected the energy I'd been investing into meditation, yoga, and other spiritual and personal growth practices into Judaism. I began keeping Shabbat, wrapping tefillin daily, and eating Kosher.

A year later, while driving back from a work project, I turned on a recording of the Torah portion to prepare for Shabbat. A familiar story unfolded - Moses invites the nation to bring gifts for the Tabernacle, their hearts fill with inspiration, their generosity overflows. I pulled over and wept tears of joy. The anniversary of my first step towards Jewish observance! In just one year, my life had turned around completely. I had been chasing after a life empty of real meaning. Now my life brimmed with eternal purpose, connected to the vast and beautiful heritage of Judaism - happier, more satisfied, and more inspired than ever before.

Then, an even deeper idea hit me. Just last week, in Parshat Ki Tisa, the Jewish people also brought gifts... Gifts of a far more sinister nature. Whereas in this week's Torah portion, they brought their gold for the construction of God's home - the Tabernacle - in last week's portion they channeled that same gold towards the construction of the Golden Calf. The identical passion, zeal, and resources, yet a completely different focus and outcome.

The gifts of this week's Torah portion didn't just represent the Jewish nation's outpouring of generosity. They represented their complete about-face of priorities and values. Instead of using their wealth for idolatry, they were using it to fulfill God's will and build His Holy Sanctuary.

My own journey reflected a similar transformation. Whereas before I had used my passion and drive for self-actualization in the pursuit of meaningless pleasure and unfulfilling endeavors, now I was directing that energy at becoming the man God made me to be.

The power to transform our natural tendencies, I would learn, is a fundamental principle of Jewish thought. The Talmud states: "One who was born under the influence of Mars will be one who spills blood. Rav Ashi said: He will be either a blood letter, or a thief, or a kosher slaughterer of animals, or a circumciser." This excerpt shows us that the same trait - spilling blood - can either lead to holy service or destruction. The raw material stays constant; the difference lies in how we channel it.

This wisdom extends far beyond its ancient context. We've all been given a unique blend of spiritual, emotional, and physical resources. The entrepreneur's relentless drive can either build or destroy. The artist's sensitivity can either create beauty or sink into despair. The leader's charisma can either uplift or manipulate. We have the free will to use these gifts as we choose - to build a Tabernacle to house the Divine, or to construct a golden calf to serve nothing but ourselves. In the words of Rabbi Lawrence Kelemen, "Everything can be used for its purpose or the opposite."

This Shabbat, take a moment to examine your own "gold" - those qualities and resources you possess in abundance. Ask yourself: Am I using them to build something meaningful? What small shift in intention could redirect their power toward greater purpose?

May we all be successful in actualizing our highest potential and using everything we've been given to serve the ultimate purpose!

“You shall not light fire in any of your dwellings on the Shabbos day” (35:3)

Why is lighting a fire singled out as the one example of forbidden work of Shabbos? Chazal say that Hashem expresses His anger over an increase in the desecration of Shabbos by causing outbreaks of fire. This is hinted to in this posuk. Aside from the prohibition against lighting a fire on Shabbos, we are warned not to cause a fire by desecrating Shabbos.

“The men came in addition to the women; every generous hearted person brought bracelets and earrings and rings and buckles, all kinds of golden objects, and every man who waved a waving of gold to Hashem”(35:22)

Rabbeinu Bachya writes: “The expression ‘in addition to the women’ indicates that the women arrived there first. When the men got there, they found that the women and already brought their donations first. This was a great achievement by the women. When the golden calf was made, they did not want to contribute their jewelry... But now, for the mitzvah of donating to the Mishkan, they ran to give their gold jewelry with great excitement. Even though the nature of women is to love and take joy in their jewelry and it is a great source of happiness for them, they brought all types of ornaments and preceded the men in this mitzvah.”

“Moshe said to the Children of Israel: See, Hashem has proclaimed by name Betzalel son of Uri son of Chur, of the tribe of Yehuda” (35:30)

Why is Betzalel’s lineage traced back to his grandfather, Chur? The Midrash explains that Chur was killed when he refused to assist the people in their creation of the golden calf. Hashem rewarded him for his sacrifice by giving him special descendants who were famous for their deeds and accomplishments. Betzalel would not have been able to lead the construction of the Mishkan were it not for the merit of his grandfather. That is why the Torah mentions that Betzalel was from the family of Chur. Betzalel obviously was a special person in his own right, but he was only worthy of his special position because of the wisdom that Hashem granted him as a reward because of his grandfather, whose merit helped him become a special leader. We have to realize that we owe many of our accomplishments to our ancestors, not to our own special merits or talents. Of course, we need to take the first step, but at the same time we must realize that our accomplishments are not entirely our own doing. Additionally, we should realize that we are the grandfathers of the future. We have no idea how far our mitzvos and positive actions can go in helping set our descendants up for success.

“Betzalel shall carry out - with Ohliav and every wise-hearted man within whom Hashem had endowed wisdom and insight to know and to do all the work for the labor of the Sanctuary - everything that Hashem had commanded” (36:1)

Why does the Torah describe wise men by referring to them as those "within whom Hashem had endowed wisdom"? Obviously wisdom only comes from Hashem?! R' Dovid Feinstein provides the following answer: The posuk teaches us that Hashem gave them wisdom in order to do something with it. The posuk emphasizes that the wisdom was endowed to certain individuals with a purpose, that they should use it for something worthwhile and not waste it. Each one of us should think about how he uses his talents and if he directs them toward the ultimate goal of serving Hashem. The gifts that a person receives from Hashem are meant for a purpose and we should not squander them on worthless pursuits. Hashem gave each individual a unique set of talents so that he can serve Hashem in a way that nobody else can.

“Bezalel made the ark of acacia wood, two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high” (37:1)

Why is Betzalel’s name singled out in connection with the work done on the aron? Rashi explains: “Since he devoted himself to the work more than the other wise men, it was called by his name.” The Torah teaches us that one who gives of himself to a project more than anyone else gets credit for the entire project. Although there were many craftsmen involved in the work, Betzalel devoted more time than anyone else to overseeing the work, planning the design, and guiding the craftsmen in their tasks. In modern parlance, we often say that “so-and-so built that building.” Even though that person may have had very little to do with the actual construction, he may have donated a significant portion of the funds, contributed to the design and blueprints of the building and overseen the progress of the project. We should all feel encouraged to take on a greater role in big projects with the knowledge that our efforts are considered in heaven to be tantamount to doing all the work. It is always a good idea to grab every mitzvah opportunity because there are no guarantees that others will do it.

by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

Houses of the Holy

By Sheldon Stern

The Torah is exceedingly chintzy with its verbiage. This said, there are two notable exceptions. The first is in Parshas Chayeh Sarah. After detailing the epic encounter at the well involving Eliezer and Rivkah the narrative is reiterated when Avraham's trusted servant breaks bread with Lavan and Besuel. The second is found in the last two Parshas of Shemos, where the Torah goes into ditto mode, giving Rashi a much-deserved two weeks off(just kidding). So we must consider what makes these two subjects stand out.

In Shemos 1:21 we're told that as a reward for defying Paroah's male infanticide orders, Shifra(Yocheved) and Puah (Miriam) were given "houses." Rashi explained that dynasties of Kohanim and priests emerged from Yocheved, while Miriam attained royalty through her marriage into Shevet Yehuda. There's a permanence to "houses" both literal and figurative and this has been picked up by the secular culture. It's the House of Dior, the House of Armani to name but two. Presently a spate of injury lawyers fill the airwaves and print media promising maximum payouts for their clients. One firm, D'Agostino prides itself as having created a legacy since the founder's daughter is also part of the practice. It would follow then that the connection between the two threads is that they both involve houses. Eliezer's Shidduch produced the quintessential Bayis Neeman Byisrael, while the Mishkan created a "home" in this world for Hashem and served as the paradigm for the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

While true, this doesn't explain why these topics were treated exceptionally. In 1982, Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder collaborated on a song called "Ebony and Ivory." Its key line was, "We learn to live when we learn to give each other what we need to survive." This was aimed at racial inequality, an issue McCartney previously tackled with the beautiful "Blackbird", penned when he was still a Beatles member, but it has broader implications. Anyone who has ever attended a Sheva Berachos has heard this Dvar Torah, "The root of Ahavah (love) is "Hav" which is "give" in Aramaic. The secret of a good marriage is that each spouse must become a giver." I'm not mocking the speech. Rabbi Miller said, "Anything worth saying should be said often and anything not worth saying shouldn't be said at all." Sir Paul was clearly Michavin to Chazal. So we can say that the reason these two discussions are given such primacy is that Hashem wants us to become givers, both individually through our families and communally by supporting our synagogues and other worthy causes.

What been said thus far is correct but it still doesn't touch the core. Oorah is currently running an ad campaign, "Hashem needs every Jew." While I understand the sentiment this is at odds with Chazal. One may not say that Hashem has needs. In Parshas Nasso each tribal chief's gift is enumerated despite the fact that it was exactly the same as that of his predecessor. We see from this that the actual gift was irrelevant to Hashem. The Gemara spells this out with the pithy, "Rachmana Liba Boi." Hashem wants us to be devoted to Him. We say, "It's the thought that counts when we try to hide our displeasure with what we received, but in dealing with Hashem intent is everything." And we can take this a step further, A phrase that's ubiquitous throughout the Parshas of the Mishkan is that the artisans are described as "Chacham Lev." What does that mean? Betsy Ross was a tremendous seamstress, but was she a Chachama Lev? Lebron James' basketball IQ is through the roof but no one will call him a Chacham Lev. The Gemara tells us that Betzalel understood all the combinations of the Aleph - Bes. Building the Mishkan was infinitely more involved than following specs. The point is that no one, including Moshe Rabbeinu, could even approach the assignment unless they were in the stayus of Chacham Lev. So what does that mean? They had to be completely consumed with the task at hand and there could be no ulterior motives. There was no billionaire's name on the Mizbeach par example. When Hashem saw that their actions were totally Lishmo He allowed them to succeed.

So now we can put this all together. As part of our morning prayers we read from Mesechta Shabbos 127a, "These are the precepts whose fruits one enjoys in this world, but whose principal remains intact for him in Olam Habo." The Gemara provides a list and there are some meaty Mitzvos to perform, but at the end we're told that Talmud Torah trumps them all. At first glance this seems difficult. The operative principle in Judaism is "Lefum Tzara Agra." Most would agree that visiting the sick, paying a Shiva call are far more difficult than studying Torah. For many, the greatest hardship of Tisha B'Av is that one can't learn that day. The Gemara's point is as follows. The essential element of marriage is to train oneself to help not only his family but as many people as possible. This, of course, doesn't preclude one from leaving a legacy of children, grandchildren etc. As for building the Mishkan, the point to be emphasized is that the builders had to develop their minds and hearts so that they could be receptive of Hashem's Divine Assistance. This, I believe, is the intent of Ex 25:8, Hashem told Moshe, "Build for Me a Mishkan and I will dwell among them." Seemingly the verse should have said, "And I will dwell within it." So the Meforshim explain that Hashem wants to dwell within each of us. While training oneself to do for others is a wonderful expression of Yiddishkeit, what emerges from the fact that the Torah repeated what it said in Parshas Trumah and Tetzaveh is that one really connects to Hashem through Limmud Torah. Rabbi Miller said that our mission in life is to achieve Shleimus. This nirvana comes from maximizing the qualities of giving and by developing our minds and hearts through the pure study of Hashem's Torah.

Holy Cow

by Rav Daniel Feldman

Keriat HaTorah, for the most part, is a rabbinical obligation. The one exception generally noted is the reading of the Parsha of Amalek before Purim (according to many explanations of the Rosh in Masechet Berachot). However, many Rishonim, such as Rashba (Berachot 13a), have included another reading as a biblical obligation: Parshat Parah, which appears originally in Parshat Chukat and is traditionally read right after Purim. This notion is also quoted in Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 146 and 685).

This is a somewhat puzzling assertion, as it is unclear where exactly in the Torah we find a commandment to read Parshat Parah (see Magen Avraham, O.C. 685, and Aruch HaShulchan 685:7). Such a gaping hole has led some authorities (such as the Vilna Gaon) to maintain that the entire reference is actually a scribal error, and the reference was not to Parshat Parah but to “Parshat Purim,” another name for the Parsha of Amalek that shares Parshat Parah’s initials. Others, hesitant to label as error a statement found in numerous Rishonim, offer innovative theories to explain the source. (See, for example, Meshekh Chokhmah and Torat Moshe, as well as Responsa Divrei Yatziv, Orach Chaim 288).

One theory that is put forward (see Artzot HaChaim of the Malbim, Hilchot Tzitzit, and Responsa Arugat HaBosem, Orach Chaim 205) concerns those select concepts and commandments that the Torah has distinguished with an imperative of “remember” (the Zechirot). Authorities differ as to the precise count of these precepts, but they include prominently such concepts as Amalek, Shabbat, and the exodus from Egypt. And indeed these three find Halachic expression: we remember Amalek through the special Keriat HaTorah, Shabbat through Kiddush on Friday night, and the exodus through its mention twice a day in the third paragraph of Keriat Shema.

However, one concept that appears to deserve inclusion seems to lack Halachic representation. Regarding the Cheit HaEigel, the Torah commands: “Remember, do not forget, how you angered Hashem, your God, in the desert” (Devarim 9:7). If so, why does no ritual or reading commemorate the incident of the golden calf? Should there not be an implementation in Jewish practice of this obligation? Therefore, it is suggested, perhaps this indicates a source for a biblical obligation of Parshat Parah. Chazal perceived a linkage between the Mitzvah of Parah Adumah and the sin of the golden calf. As Rashi says, “Let the mother come and clean up the soiling of the child.” The adult cow symbolizes the parent, and in atoning for Cheit HaEigel, it is “cleaning up” the mess of the calf.

Within that understanding, it may be posited that the sin of the calf is indeed commemorated, albeit in an indirect manner. Rather than directly evoke the disgraceful episode of the golden calf, we chose a less embarrassing path, reading about the commandment that atones and not about the transgression that incurred guilt. Such a reading would reflect back on the very nature of the obligation of remembering the calf. The focus is not on the sin, but rather on the path back from impurity. The Torah wishes to impress upon the psyche that even in the aftermath of egregious moral failing, the route of return remains open.

However, there were those who assumed a different theme in this commandment of remembering. Some suggest that we are told to constantly recall the instance of the calf as a cautionary measure. At the time of the sin, the Jewish people were on an extremely high level of spirituality, so close to the occasion of the giving of the Torah. At such a time, one may believe himself invulnerable to temptation or moral error, protected by a bubble of holiness. The incident of the calf must always be remembered to warn that no one is protected in that manner, and that descent to sin can happen whenever inadequate care is taken.

If that is the theme, then, it would seem that using the Parah Adumah as a reminder would be an ineffective method. It may represent atonement, but the message of spiritual vigilance would be lacking. However, it might be suggested that even this motif is present in the Parah Adumah. We are well aware of the central paradox of this commandment. At the same moment that it confers purity upon the impure, it incurs impurity on to the purifiers. From a straight logical perspective, this is confounding: is the Red Heifer a vehicle of purity or of impurity?

It might be suggested that this is precisely where the warning of Parah Adumah lies. At times, one may feel that he is on such a high level as to be invulnerable from stumbling. This could have been the mentality of the Jews at the time of the golden calf; at such a point in history, how could they sin? We are bidden to constantly remember this incident in order to remind us that no one is absolved from the responsibility of personal vigilance.

In its own way, the Parah Adumah makes this point as well. If one is involved in a religious activity, in a rite of purification, it might be assumed that one is insulated from any spiritual failing. Yet we find that even this activity contains the elements of impurity. The message is clear: no context or activity is a spiritual guarantee; it is only through constant, careful, self-awareness that one can ensure that his behavior is actually a true expression of the Ratzon Hashem.