**SALT – PARASHAT VAYAKHEL 5782 / 2022**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Vayakhel tells of *Benei Yisrael*’s generous and enthusiastic response to Moshe’s command that they donate materials toward the construction of the *Mishkan* and its furnishings. Rashi (35:27), citing the *Sifrei*, famously comments that the *nesi’im* – the leaders of the tribes – did not initially participate in the donations, saying, “The public will donate whatever it donates, and we will complete whatever is missing.” In the end, the nation donated everything except the precious stones needed for the *kohen gadol*’s garments, and the spices and oil needed for the *menorah*, the anointing oil, and the incense. These materials were supplied by the *nesi’im*.

In other midrashic sources, we find more elaboration on why the *nesi’im* at first did not want to donate materials for the *Mishkan*. In *Bamidbar Rabba* (12:16), the Midrash comments that they desisted because they resented the fact that “Moshe did not tell them to bring donations for the *Mishkan*.” The Maharzu commentary to the Midrash explains this remark to mean that the *nesi’im* wanted to donate all the materials themselves, without any donations being accepted from the rest of the nation. Indeed, the *Midrash Ha-gadol* relates that the *nesi’im* said to Moshe, “We will make the Sanctuary from our assets, and Israel will not take part in it,” and when Moshe refused, noting that God wanted the entire nation to contribute, the *nesi’im* withdrew and did not donate.

The Maharzu explains the *nesi’im*’s refusal in light of the comment of *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* that the *nesi’im* did not take part in the sin of the golden calf. They thus felt that only they, and not the rest of the nation, were worthy of the privilege of donating materials for the construction of the *Mishkan*. They wrongly assumed that the people were permanently tainted by the grave sin of worshipping the calf, and thus undeserving of participation in the project to construct the site of God’s presence among the nation.

If so, then the Midrash here warns against the tendency to discount and reject people because of their past mistakes. God insisted that the entire nation be invited and encouraged to take part in the donation towards the *Mishkan* despite the grave sin which they had committed, because people should not be permanently stifled as a result of past failures. People sometimes utilize the same faulty logic used by the *nesi’im*, assuming that people guilty of wrongs in the past should not be allowed, let alone asked, to make meaningful contributions in the present or future. Similarly, in our desire to feel superior, we might be tempted to point to people’s past wrongs as a reason to look upon them with disdain even now in the present. The Midrash here teaches that all people are welcome to contribute all they are capable of contributing, despite their past mistakes. Nobody should ever be made to feel trapped and confined by their past wrongs which they now genuinely regret. God invites all of us, even those who “worshipped the golden calf,” to make our contributions to the “*Mishkan*” and take part in our nation’s sacred mission of representing Him to the world.

Sunday

As mentioned yesterday, the Torah in Parashat Vayakhel (35:27) tells that during the collection of materials for the *Mishkan*,the *nesi’im* – the leaders of the twelve tribes – donated the precious stones needed for the *kohen gadol*’s breastplate and apron. Rashi, based on several Midrashic sources, comments that the *nesi’im* did not initially participate in the donation of materials, and it was only after the rest of the nation donated that they stepped in to contribute what was missing.

The Gemara in Masekhet Yoma (75a) advances a different reading of the word “*nesi’im*” in this verse, interpreting it as a reference to storm clouds (as in the verse, “*Nesi’im ve-ru’ach ve-geshem*” – Mishlei 25:14). According to this reading, the precious stones were supplied miraculously by special clouds, and these stones rained down from the heavens together with the manna each morning during the period when materials were being collected for the *Mishkan*.

It appears, as first glance, that these sources present us with two differing views as to the origin of the precious stones. One maintains that they were donated by the tribal leaders, and the other held that they were supplied miraculously from the heavens.

*Chatam Sofer*, however, in his commentary to Masekhet Gittin (35a), suggests that these two traditions can be reconciled. He explains that the precious stones fell as part of the *nesi’im*’s ration of manna, and they then proceeded to donate these stones. These stones indeed originated from the heavens and arrived miraculously – but they were sent to the *nesi’im* who then brought them to the *Mishkan*.

*Chatam Sofer* writes that although these stones were supplied miraculously, the *nesi’im* were nevertheless credited with making a donation to the *Mishkan* because the stones occupied a small portion of their daily ration of manna. Each person received only an *omer* of manna each morning (Shemot 16:16), and on the morning (or mornings) when the *nesi’im* received these stones as part of their portion of manna, a slight amount of manna – several kernels – was missing, supplanted by the small precious stones. Since the *nesi’im* lost a slight amount of their daily food ration on account of the precious stones, they are credited with having made a donation.

*Chatam Sofer*’s understanding perhaps reminds us of the value of every small sacrifice we make for the sake of the “*Mishkan*,” to bring sanctity into our lives. Just as the missing grains of manna were regarded as the *nesi’im*’s “donation,” so is every modest sacrifice for the service of God considered significant. Every bit of time we take out to involve ourselves in Torah learning or *mitzva* observance, every expense we incur, every inconvenience we endure, and every bit of physical and mental energy we invest, is valuable. We must not discount even the small sacrifices that we make, and we should instead eagerly and enthusiastically seize every *mitzva* opportunity that presents itself, big or small, despite the sacrifices entailed, recognizing the great value of each and every such sacrifice.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Vayakhel (38:8) tells that the *kiyor* – the sink from which the *kohanim* were required to wash their hands and feet before entering the *Mishkan* to serve – was made from mirrors donated by women.

Rav Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye (*Toldot Yaakov Yosef*) suggests an explanation for the symbolic significance of the use of mirrors for specifically this purpose – to make a sink for cleansing oneself. The requirement that the *kohanim* wash themselves before entering the *Mishkan* to serve, Rav Yaakov Yosef explains, represents the need to “cleanse” ourselves, to whatever extent reasonably possible, of our negative character traits before proceeding to serve God. In order to properly serve our Creator through Torah study and *mitzva* performance, we must first try to eliminate character flaws such as arrogance, preoccupation with vain pleasures, and other negative qualities. Often, however, we are unaware of our faults which need to be corrected. We might likely have flaws in our character that we do not see. The *kiyor* was made from mirrors to instruct that the process of cleansing ourselves must begin by “looking in the mirror,” by scrutinizing ourselves with pure honesty and objectivity to identify our flaws and shortcomings. People look in a mirror in order to see if there is anything wrong with their appearance, and which improvements need to be made. And thus the *kiyor*, the symbol of the need for “cleansing” our characters, was made from mirrors, representing the importance of honest self-assessment and introspection as a necessary prerequisite for self-improvement.

Rav Yaakov Yosef cites in this context a teaching of his mentor, the *Ba’al Shem Tov*, asserting that very often, the “mirror” that most accurately reflects our true selves is our fellowman. Many of us are naturally reluctant to acknowledge our faults, or innocently fail to recognize them. The *Ba’al Shem Tov* taught that oftentimes, the faults we see and dislike in other people are a reflection of our own faults. When we observe a deficiency in another person, this might very well indicate that we ourselves have that same deficiency. Thus, before we look disdainfully upon our fellow in whose character we find a serious flaw, we should honestly think if perhaps we share this fault, if the image of that individual is actually a “mirror” reflecting our own image. If we react this way, then we can transform negativity and disdain into an opportunity to learn more about ourselves so we can grow and advance.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Vayakhel of *Benei Yisrael*’s enthusiastic response to God’s call for the donation of materials for the construction of the *Mishkan*. The Torah relates that the artisans summoned by Moshe to perform the work surveyed the materials, and then approached Moshe to report that the people had donated more than what was needed. Moshe promptly made an announcement that no more should be donated.

The Torah tells that after Moshe summoned the artisans, “they took from Moshe’s presence all the donations which the Israelites had brought for the tasks of the sacred work…and they brought more to him each morning” (36:3). This verse seems to be saying that even after the artisans took all the materials, the people continued donating, and the artisans thus realized that the people were giving more than what was needed.

However, Rav Aharon Levine (the “Reisha Rav”), in *Ha-derash Ve-ha-iyun*, cites a different reading of this verse in the name of Rav Eliyahu Ben-Chaim’s *Imrei Shefer*. He explains that in the clause, “and they brought more to him each morning” refers not to *Benei Yisrael*, but rather to the artisans. According to this interpretation, the Torah here is informing us that the artisans themselves took part in the donation of materials for the *Mishkan*. We might have expected them to absolve themselves of this obligation, as they would be donating a great amount of time and a great amount of energy to this project. Their work and effort would certainly appear to be equivalent to a very generous donation, and thus, they had every right to excuse themselves from contributing financially along with the rest of the nation. But the artisans insisted on participating in the donation, and this, according to Rav Ben-Chaim, is the meaning of “and they brought more to him each morning.” Despite being appointed to perform the work building the *Mishkan* and all its furnishings, the artisans also made their own financial contribution, refusing to allow themselves to be excluded from the nation’s generous donation to the construction of God’s Sanctuary.

Wednesday

Parashat Vayakhel begins with Moshe assembling *Benei Yisrael* and conveying to them the command of Shabbat observance. The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni*, 408) views this assembly as a model of assemblies that are to be held each week, on Shabbat, for all time. In instructing Moshe to convene this assembly, the Midrash comments, God commanded Moshe: “Make for yourself large assemblies and publicly teach them the laws of Shabbat, so that future generations will learn from you to convene assemblies each and every Shabbat, and gather in study halls to teach and instruct to Israel words of Torah, what is forbidden and permissible, so that My great Name will be glorified among My children.” Just as Moshe assembled *Benei Yisrael* after his final return from the top of Mount Sinai in order to convey to them the command of Shabbat observance, so are scholars to assemble communities every Shabbat in order to teach them the particulars of *Halakha*.

Rav Yeshaya Ehrenfeld, in *Sheivet Sofer*, finds it significant that the Midrash here speaks here specifically of the instruction of practical *Halakha*, as opposed to in-depth, theoretical analysis of the laws, or deep, esoteric insights into Torah thought. If a scholar wishes to present his novel theories and insights, Rav Ehrenfeld writes, it is inappropriate for him to “convene assemblies,” to take the initiative and ask people to attend his lectures. This would come across as arrogant self-promotion, as though the rabbi seeks to put his scholarship and analytic skills on display. If he would go around summoning people to his talks, he would give the impression that he is looking to impress. Therefore, the Midrash here speaks of an obligation for scholars to initiate assemblies and gather people not to present their original insights, but rather to teach practical *halakhot*. In lectures such as these, the scholar does not display his ingenuity and analytic skill, but rather simply teaches the codified material, providing practical halakhic instruction. For this kind of instruction, it is perfectly appropriate – and in fact obligatory – for a rabbi to encourage people to attend his lectures.

This explanation of the Midrash’s comment touches upon the delicate question of whether and how to promote and publicize Torah. On the one hand, we of course believe that all members of our nation, and *Am Yisrael* as a whole, benefits from Torah knowledge, and therefore, accomplished scholars should certainly feel a desire to share their scholarship with others. But on the other hand, a scholar who promotes his own work comes across as arrogant, and might then discourage people from coming to learn from home. Scholars bear the responsibility to find ways to disseminate their valuable Torah insights and wisdom in a way that makes it clear that they are promoting the Torah and not themselves, and that they are driven by a genuine desire to spread Torah knowledge, and not to attain fame and prestige.

Thursday

In the opening verses of Parashat Vayakhel, we read of Moshe assembling *Benei Yisrael* and relaying to them God’s command to observe Shabbat by refraining from constructive activity, before proceeding to present God’s instructions for building the *Mishkan*. Rashi (35:2), based on the *Mekhilta*, explains that Moshe first spoke to the people about Shabbat observance to clarify that the construction of the *Mishkan* did not override the Shabbat prohibitions. The people might have assumed that a project as important as the *Mishkan* justified suspending the Shabbat restrictions in order to accelerate the process. Moshe therefore first presented the command to observe Shabbat, to impress upon *Benei Yisrael* that the work to build the *Mishkan* and its furnishings was to be put on hold during Shabbat.

Moshe introduced the *mitzva* of Shabbat observance by announcing to the people, “These are the things which the Lord has commanded you to do” (35:1). Numerous commentators noted the irony of Moshe’s use of the word “*la-asot*” (“to do”) in reference to the command of Shabbat observance. This command, of course, requires that we specifically not “do” – that we desist from constructive activity. Yet, Moshe tells *Benei Yisrael* that Shabbat observance is what God commanded them “*la-asot*” – “to do.”

This question, presumably, is what led some commentators – such as Ibn Ezra and the Ramban – to explain that the word “*la-asot*” actually refers not to Shabbat observance, but rather to the construction of the *Mishkan*. Moshe began his discourse to the people by saying, “These are the things which the Lord has commanded you to do,” referring to the building of the *Mishkan*, but he briefly digressed by mentioning the obligation to observe Shabbat to clarify that the work for the *Mishkan* must be suspended during Shabbat.

Rav Meir Varshaviak, in *Imrei Kohen*, explains differently, suggesting that even inactivity can be described by the term “*la-asot*” if it fulfills God’s command. The suspension of the work for the *Mishkan* on Shabbat expresses the notion that whereas sometimes God wants us to build, accomplish and achieve, at other times, He wants us to desist, to withdraw, to remain inactive. Under certain circumstances, we “do,” we obey God’s will, through inaction, and thus even Shabbat observance can indeed be described with the word “*la-asot*,” insofar as our withdrawal from constructive activity – even valuable pursuits, such as the construction of the *Mishkan* – fulfills a divine command.

Rav Varshaviak suggests that this message was also intended for the artisans who would be working to build the *Mishkan* and its furnishings. As Moshe would later inform the people (35:30), God selected a man named Betzalel as the chief artisan assigned to oversee the project. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 69b) tells that Betzalel at the time was just a young teenager. Many or most of the artisans were, presumably, much older and more experienced than Betzalel, but they would have to defer to his authority, as God had named him the supervisor of the project. There would be situations in which they would think something should be done, but Betzalel would think otherwise, and instruct them to desist. They, too, would need to recognize that sometimes “*la-asot*” – fulfilling the will of God – requires withdrawing, not doing what we might intuitively think is warranted. Just as they would fulfill God’s will by refraining from work for the *Mishkan* on Shabbat, so would they be fulfilling His will by yielding to Betzalel’s authority and refraining from doing something which he decided should not be done.

Friday

We read in Parashat Vayakhel (35:30) of God’s designation of Betzalel as the leader of the project to build the *Mishkan*. Betzalel is identified as the grandson of Chur, who, along with Aharon, was appointed to lead the nation during Moshe’s forty-day stay atop Mount Sinai to receive God’s laws (Shemot 24:14).

The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni* 411) famously relates that Chur opposed the people when they decided to fashion a golden calf, and they killed him. Chur was rewarded for this ultimate act of sacrifice, the Midrash teaches, through the appointment of his grandson as the chief artisan who oversaw the construction of the *Mishkan*. The Midrash states, “Chur gave his life for the Almighty during the incident of the [golden] calf; the Almighty said to him: By your life, I will make all your children famous in this world…” Betzalel received special honor and prestige, a reward for his grandfather’s courageous opposition to the worship of the golden calf. The Midrash emphasizes that although numerous artisans participated in the work to construct the *Mishkan*, only Betzalel was singled out for special distinction, as a reward for Chur’s defiance of the people at the time of the sin of the golden calf.

It would seem that the Midrash here underscores the contrast between Betzalel’s prestige and the rejection suffered by his grandfather. Chur faced the ultimate, most extreme form of rejection and disdain – to the point where the entire nation rose against him and brutally took his life. His grandson, however, would receive great honor for building the *Mishkan –* a project which, according to some opinions, served to atone and rectify the sin of the golden calf. Chur was despised and even killed for refusing to compromise his principles, but eventually, the people showed great respect for those principles which he defended, as reflected in the prestige received by Betzalel for his role in constructing the *Mishkan* to atone for their mistake. The Midrash perhaps teaches that we should not be afraid to remain true to our values and principles even in the face of scorn and derision. Even if it seems that we lose people’s admiration for refusing to compromise our ideals, eventually, we will be respected for it.

At times, it takes a great deal of strength, courage and determination to refuse to yield to pressure, and to adhere to our principles when we are challenged. The Midrash urges us to follow Chur’s example of unyielding devotion to one’s values even in the face of overbearing pressure, and to trust that even if this devotion invites hostility in the present, we will ultimately be admired for our courageous, unwavering commitment.