YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT PEKUDEI**

**The Priestly Garments**

As anyone who follows the weekly *parasha* knows, the details of the *Mishkan* are listed in the Torah several times. It seems that a single description was not enough; the Torah had to repeat it over and over again. We will adopt this approach and try to illuminate some aspects of the *Mishkan* that I have mentioned in the past, from a different angle.

**Priestly Garments Vs. Vessels of the *Mishkan***

I have noted in the past[[1]](#footnote-1) that the priestly garments might on one hand be considered elements of the *Mishkan* itself, but on the other hand, could be counted among its vessels. This duality arises from the fact that the garments embody a unique combination of blue-dyed wool and six-ply linen thread, along with threads of gold. Close study of *Parashat Teruma* reveals that each material is dedicated for a certain type of use: gold is used for the vessels of the *Mishkan*, but not in the cloths of the structure (the clasps, which are gold [26:9, 36:13], are not part of the cloths themselves). *Tekhelet* (blue-dyed threads) and other types of wool are used for the cloths of the *Mishkan*, but not for making vessels. The priestly garments fall somewhere in between; they are woven out of blue wool as well as gold thread.

In *Parashat* *Teruma*,[[2]](#footnote-2) we saw that Moshe experienced a vision of the *Mishkan* while he was atop Mount Sinai, as the Torah states explicitly no less than four times: “According to all that I show you, the pattern of the *Mishkan*, and the pattern of all its vessels – so shall you make it” (*Shemot* 25:9); “as shown to you on the mountain” (25:40, 26:30, 27:8). But it seems that God did not show Moshe an image of the priestly garments.[[3]](#footnote-3) Surprisingly enough, in the sections describing the construction of the *Mishkan*, we find the opposite: the Torah notes with regard to almost every garment (throughout *Shemot* 39) that it was made “as the Lord commanded Moshe,” while very few elements of the *Mishkan* and its vessels include this expression in their description (with the exception of the general summary, after the entire project is complete).

Perhaps there is a connection between these two seemingly opposing phenomena. Since Moshe saw an image of the *Mishkan* while atop Mount Sinai, it is clear that he built it exactly as he saw it; there is no need to state explicitly that it was made “as God had commanded him.” The garments, on the other hand, were not shown to Moshe in a prophetic vision; he had to understand from God’s description how they were to be made. Therefore, the Torah emphasizes explicitly that the garments were indeed made precisely “as God had commanded Moshe.”

This explanation sheds light on another point. In the command to build the *Mishkan*, there is no mention of Betzalel as the chief builder, nor any indication that any special wisdom is needed in order to build it. It is clear that the construction of the *Mishkan* requires special skill and insight; there is no need for the Torah to note this. On the other hand, God commands Moshe explicitly to approach the “wise of heart” to create the garments (*Shemot* 28:3), even before He commands him to appoint Betzalel over the construction of the *Mishkan*. Since Moshe did not see the garments on Mount Sinai, great wisdom is needed to create them – greater even than the wisdom necessary to build the *Mishkan*.

Thus, it seems that Moshe did not experience a vision of the garments on Mount Sinai. But why not? Why did God show him all the vessels of the *Mishkan*, but not the garments of the *kohanim*? I generally don’t address the reasons for *mitzvot* in the framework of these *shiurim*, and try to adhere to the *peshat* – the plain reading of the text. Nevertheless, it seems that we cannot ignore the symbolic meanings embedded in the *Mishkan*, and therefore this time our focus will deviate slightly from the “*peshat*.”

We might answer the question above in one of two ways, and the two answers may even be related to each other. Firstly, the *Mishkan* is the abode of God, and therefore God issues precise instructions as to how it should be built. On the other hand, while the *kohanim* work in the *Mishkan*, they are not part of the edifice. The priestly garments represent not only the service in the *Mishkan*, but also their wearers – the *kohanim* – themselves, and therefore the Torah does not include precise commands in this area, but rather suffices with general instructions.

**Written Law and Oral Law**

The second answer relates to the significance of the *Mishkan* as a continuation of the revelation and the giving of the Torah at Sinai. After *Am Yisrael* declared, “We shall do and we shall hear,” demonstrating their readiness to hear God’s word, God commanded them to build the *Mishkan*, thus constructing a fixed entity that would be a continuation of the revelation. This continuity is emphasized in the fact that Moshe has a prophetic vision of the *Mishkan* while on Mount Sinai, in the very same place where he receives the *Luchot*.

But Moshe received on Mount Sinai not only the Written Law – the *Luchot* – but also the Oral Law,[[4]](#footnote-4) and the combination of these two aspects of Torah should also find expression in the *Mishkan*, as a continuation of the experience of Sinai. The *Mishkan* and its vessels are a continuation for the Written Law, and therefore God shows Moshe their exact form on Mount Sinai, leaving no room for interpretation. The priestly garments, on the other hand, correspond to the Oral Law: Moshe receives only the outline – the command to make the garments – while the exact interpretation and technique are left to his discretion. It is for this reason that the Torah emphasizes over and over that the garments were made “as God had commanded Moshe”; God affirms the interpretation of Moshe and Betzalel regarding the making of the garments.

Of course, the concepts of “Written Law” and “Oral Law” are not limited to the realm of the Torah and its interpretation. In general, the creation of any complex object comprises two stages: first its formation, and then its development. Thus, God and man are often partners: God creates wheat, and man handles its development – he grinds and bakes it, turning it into bread and adapting it for his use. Just as the Written Law is the initial creation, and the Oral Law is its development and interpretation,[[5]](#footnote-5) adapting it to the human reality – so wheat may be compared the Written Law, while the final product, the bread, may be compared to the Oral Law. Likewise, the *Mishkan* is like the Written Law, and the *kohanim* who are active within it are like the Oral Law. Therefore, the *Mishkan* was shown to Moshe at Sinai in all its detail, while the details of the priestly garments were left to his interpretation.

**The Braided Chains of the *Choshen***

The distinction between the Written Law and the Oral Law finds expression in other aspects of the *Mishkan* as well. I will propose here another example of the distinction, which also begins with attention to the plain meaning of the text and then moves to an attempt to understand its meaning.

The Torah states in its descriptions of some of the vessels that they are made of “gold,” while others are said to be made of “pure gold.” We will leave for some other occasion an analysis of the difference between “gold” and “pure gold”; for the purposes of the present discussion, suffice it to say that not all the vessels are made of pure gold. If we consider which vessels are and which are not, we find that any object that serves as a means for some other purpose, and is not a vessel in and of itself, is made of regular gold, not “pure gold.” Thus, the gold that coats the beams of the *Mishkan* is not “pure gold” (26:29) – since, while the cloths held by the beams make up the main structure of the *Mishkan*, the beams are merely support. For the same reason, the clasps of the *Mishkan* are not made of pure gold, but rather of regular gold (26:6). The *Shulchan* (Table) is made of pure gold, as are its auxiliary vessels, but its decorations and accessories – the poles, rings, and crown – are covered with regular gold, not pure gold (25:24-29).[[6]](#footnote-6) It is also interesting that the Torah is consistent in its distinction between regular gold and pure gold; the same distinction is maintained (for the most part) both in the instructions as to the building of the *Mishkan* and in the description of its actual construction.

When the Torah describes the fashioning of the rings of the *choshen* (breastplate; 28:23-27), as well as the golden threads woven into other garments of the *Kohen Gadol*, there is no mention of them being “pure gold.” Seemingly, the message that is being conveyed is that the *kohanim* are not on the level of “vessels of the *Mishkan*,” but are rather auxiliary elements in the service of the *Mishkan* (like the beams supporting the cloths), and therefore their garments are made not from pure gold, but rather regular gold. The exception is the *tzitz* – the golden band that the *Kohen Gadol* wears on his forehead – which is made from pure gold (28:36). But in fact, the *tzitz* is not one of the priestly garments, and therefore its creation is not commanded at the beginning of *Parashat* *Tetzaveh*, among all the other priestly garments. From a certain perspective, the *tzitz* is indeed one of the vessels of the *Mishkan*, and therefore it is made of pure gold. This is reflected in the opinion of R. Shimon (*Yoma* 7b) that the *tzitz* atones even when it is not being worn on the *Kohen Gadol*’s forehead. Similarly, the bells on the ends of the *Kohen Gadol*’s robe have a special function when he enters the *Kodesh Ha-kodashim* (Holy of Holies) – and therefore they, too, are made of pure gold (39:25).[[7]](#footnote-7)

There is an exception to this rule, and that is the braided gold chains holding the *choshen*, which are made of pure gold (28:14). This seems unnecessary: the role of the chains is simply to hold the *choshen* in place, “so that the *choshen* will not come loose from the *efod* (apron)” (*Shemot* 28:28). Nevertheless, wherever the chains are mentioned, the Torah notes that they are made of pure gold. Clearly, then, these chains are *not* serving a mere technical purpose, but are vessels with their own inherent importance.

There is also another indication of the importance of the chains. The Torah commands about their fashioning twice: once just after the command regarding the *efod* itself (28:14), and then again as part of the command concerning the *choshen* (28:22). The first command follows on the command to make the *efod* but is presented separately from it – as though the chains are a vessel in and of themselves, independent of any other. In both commands, the Torah emphasizes that the chains must be connected to the settings for the onyx stones: following the details of the *efod* we find, “and you shall put the braided chains upon the settings” (28:14) and in the description of the *choshen* we find, “and you shall put the [other] two ends of the braided chains on the two settings” (28:25). This design seems to indicate that the chains have three-fold significance: on one hand, they are part of the *choshen*; on the other hand, they are an independent element; and on top of all that, they also might be part of the *efod*.

In order to understand the role of the chains, let us first clarify the difference between the *efod* and the *choshen*. These two garments share the distinction of having the names of the twelve tribes inscribed on stones that are set in them. We might point to a difference in the way in which they are written: the Torah says the names of the tribes should be inscribed in birth order on the onyx stones at the shoulders of the *efod*, but there is no instruction as to their order on the *choshen*. Perhaps we can draw a conclusion based on the external design of the *choshen*: its twelve stones, in a 4x3 arrangement, recalls the way Bnei Yisrael would organize into four camps, each comprising three tribes. Based on this similarity, we might conclude that the names of the tribes are inscribed in the order of their encampment in the wilderness, such that each group of three stones bears the names of the tribes in one of the camps.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The arrangement of the camp of Israel requires the presence of the *Mishkan* in its midst. When there is no *Mishkan* in the camp – such as, for example, while Bnei Yisrael are travelling from one station to the next – the tribes proceed in accordance with their birth order. When the journey comes to a halt and the *Mishkan* is erected again in the middle of the camp, the Divine Presence serves to effect a switch from birth order to encampment order.

The *efod*, then, symbolizes reality as it is: the tribes are organized in their birth order. The *choshen*, on the other hand, symbolizes reality with God’s Presence: the tribes are organized according to the arrangement of their encampment.[[9]](#footnote-9) Parallel to our discussion above, we might suggest that the *efod* is comparable to the Written Law, while the *choshen* parallels the Oral Law. The Written Law is more ancient, like birth order; it has an existence of its own even without the Oral Law; it preceded the world. The Oral Law is simply a revelation of the Written Law; it has no meaning without it. Were it not for the Written Law, the Oral Law would not be holy in any way; it would be like any human creation. Thus, the chains connecting the *efod* to the *choshen* are actually connecting the aspect of the Written Law to the aspect of the Oral Law, and thus they bear great importance.

**Two Points in Conclusion**

I would like to conclude by noting two interesting points that arise from the *parasha*. The scope of the *shiur* does not allow for elaboration, but at the very least we can mention them briefly.

1. Both in the command to build the *Mishkan* and in the description of its construction, the Torah starts with the *Aron* and ends with the courtyard – i.e., it moves from the inside outwards, from the more holy to the less holy. The order of the priestly garments is different: the command is introduced with the *efod* and concludes with the *ketonet* (tunic), with the *tzitz* appearing in between them.[[10]](#footnote-10) Perhaps the logic behind this is that the Torah starts with the garments of the *Kohen Gadol*, and then moves on to the garments that are worn by the other *kohanim* as well; within this division, the garments of the *Kohen Gadol* are listed in ascending order of holiness. This would explain the order of his special garments: the *efod*, *choshen*, coat, and *tzitz*,[[11]](#footnote-11) though we still have the question of why the Torah mentions the garments in ascending order of holiness while the vessels are listed in descending order.

2. We are used to thinking of Moshe as setting up the beams and then spreading the cloths over them. But if we look at the text, we find that first Moshe puts up the *Mishkan* (40:18), and only afterwards does he set up the *adanim* (foundations) and beams and spread the tent over the *Mishkan*. This suggests that the cloths were set up first, without the beams (perhaps four pillars were placed in the four corners, connected by ropes, and the cloths were spread over the ropes), and only afterwards were the beams set up under the cloths. It is not clear why Moshe chose to follow this strange order, rather than first having the beams standing and then spreading the cloths over them.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish. Edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-shemot/parashat-tetzaveh/tetzaveh-sanctity-and-service>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-shemot/parashat-teruma/teruma-structure-mishkan>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One might think there was no need to show him such a vision since the creation of the garments should not be particularly complicated, but it turns out that this is not the case: Rashi, the greatest of the commentators, states (on *Shemot* 28:4) that he does not know how the *efod* (apron) was made. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Parashat Mishpatim* – which at that time was Oral Law – and perhaps some other *mitzvot* were also part of that primal Oral Law. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Chasidic works present the Oral Law as revealing the essence of the Written Law. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A similar picture emerges in relation to the *Aron* (25:10-18) and the incense altar (30:1-5). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The word “pure” does not appear in the description of the bells in *Shemot* 28:33-34, but this would require a separate discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Rambam maintains that the names of the tribes were written in a different order, not the order of their encampment, but the *Zohar* notes that the order of the encampment is also the order of the tribes on the *choshen*. With God’s help, I will elaborate on this in a future *shiur*; readers are also invited to read my article in *Daf Kesher* #765, Tamuz 5760. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Indeed, God’s name is also engraved on the *choshen*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The order in *Parashat Pekudei* is slightly different but raises a similar difficulty. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. It makes sense that the holiness of the *choshen* is greater than that of the *efod*, but it is difficult to understand why the robe would be considered holier than the *efod* even though it is worn underneath it and serves a more technical function. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)