**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYAKHEL**

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Motzaei Shabbat

As the Torah describes in Parashat Teruma (25:20) and in Parashat Vayakhel (37:9), the ark in the *Mishkan* was covered by a piece of gold (*kapporet*) that featured two winged *keruvim* (cherubs) that faced one another.

The *Keli Yakar* (in Parashat Teruma) comments that the features of the *keruvim* allude to the qualities that are required of the religious leaders, those who “guard” the Torah, a role symbolized by the *keruvim* who hovered over the ark which contained the Torah. First, tradition teaches that the *keruvim* appeared as newborn infants, and thus represent innocence and purity. Those who assume the mantle of Torah leadership must strive for pristine innocence and pure goodness, like that of a newborn. Secondly, the *Keli Yakar* writes, the cherubs’ wings are described as directed upwards, towards the heavens. The *Keli Yakar* contends that this image symbolizes sincerity of motives. The human “*keruvim*,” those who wish to serve as guardians of the Torah, must be directed heavenward, driven and motivated by the pure, genuine desire to fulfill God’s will and ensure that His law is preserved and perpetuated. The *Keli Yakar* denounces those who teach and lead for the sake of personal honor, who use the role of “cherub” to further their own egotistical interests, rather than out of genuine concern for the Almighty’s honor.

Finally, the *Keli Yakar* writes, the two *keruvim* faced one another, symbolizing friendship and goodwill among people. The leaders, teachers and scholars we need are those who can turn their faces to one another with congeniality and warmth, who study and work with the aim of guiding and inspiring, rather than to compete, and who are able and willing to get along with others and take their concerns and ideas into consideration. The position of “guardian” requires the innocence of a child, but the selflessness and humility of a mature and especially refined adult.

Of course, these two elements – sincerity and harmonious interpersonal relationships – are very closely related to one another. If a person is sincere in his pursuit of Torah scholarship and leadership, and is not driven by a lust for respect or authority, he will more likely be inclined to bend and humbly submit to the wishes and opinions of other people, and to thus create peaceful relationships. By contrast, a person who is motived by personal interests is prone to waging unnecessary battles and stirring controversy in the pursuit of his selfish goals.

The *Keli Yakar* reminds us that Torah life must rest on this foundation of sincerity and peace, the honest and genuine desire to serve the Almighty, and a willingness to work harmoniously and selflessly with others in this lifelong endeavor.

Sunday

As we noted yesterday, the Torah (in Parashat Teruma, 25:20, and in Parashat Vayakhel, 37:9) describes the *keruvim* (cherubs) on the covering of the ark as having wings which spread upwards, over the ark, and as facing one another.

Rav Yisroel Dovid Harfenes, in his *Duda’ei Yisrael* (Parashat Teruma), suggests that the image of the *keruvim* symbolizes the kindness and concern that we must all show towards our fellow Jews. The wings hovering over the ark as a protective covering represent the responsibility we must all feel for each other’s protection and well-being. Just as the cherubs symbolically protected the ark below, we must all see ourselves as responsible for the welfare of our fellow Jews.

However, this is not enough. The *keruvim* hovered over the ark, but also faced one another. Rav Harfenes suggests that this symbolizes the personal warmth and sensitivity that must accompany our charitable endeavors and acts of kindness. Beyond lending one another practical assistance, we must look at one another in the face, showing genuine friendship, concern and attentiveness. Rav Harfenes draws our attention to *Chazal*’s comment in Masekhet Bava Batra (9b), “Whoever gives a coin to a poor person is blessed with six blessings, and one who soothes him with words is blessed with eleven blessings.” So often, giving people our time, a warm smile, and companionship provides them with far greater assistance than a charitable donation or practical help. As we work to spread our “wings” over one another, caring for each other and coming to each other’s side during times of need, we must also remember to turn our faces towards one another, to extend warmth and friendship and show genuine concern.

Monday

The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 48:5) tells that *Benei Yisrael* marveled at the wisdom and talents of Betzalel, the artisan chosen by the Almighty to lead the construction of the *Mishkan*: “Everybody was saying, ‘Betzalel made the *Mishkan* with his wisdom and brilliance!”” God, however, wanted the people to recognize that He is the source of Betzalel’s special talent. For this reason, the Midrash comments, Moshe told *Benei Yisrael* when informing them of Betzalel’s appointment, “See that the Lord has called upon the name of Betzalel…” (Shemot 35:30) – emphasizing the point that it was God who endowed Betzalel with his unique skills. The Midrash draws an analogy to a physician who earned widespread praise for curing a certain patient, but then his teacher came along and asked for recognition, as he enabled the physician to cure ill patients. Similarly, the Midrash comments, as the people applauded and heaped praise upon Betzalel for his masterful work, God asked that they recognize His role, as He granted Betzalel the knowledge and capabilities he needed for this formidable undertaking.

On the simplest level, the Midrash reminds us of the need to thank the Almighty for our talents and achievements, recognizing that any skills we possess are, ultimately, gifts which we have received from our Creator. Humility does not require us to deny our skills and talents, but it does require us to, among other things, acknowledge that they have been graciously given to us by God.

Rav Simcha Bunim of Pashischa (*Kol Simcha*, Parashat Vayakhel) adds a deeper interpretation of the Midrash’s comment. Rashi, based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, understood the *Mishkan* as the means through which *Benei Yisrael* earned atonement for the sin of the golden calf. Accordingly, Rav Simcha Bunim writes, the Midrash draws our attention to the fact that God provided *Benei Yisrael* the person they needed for the construction of the *Mishkan*, the means of their atonement, when this became necessary. If they wondered whether or not God accepted their repentance and granted them atonement, they could look to the fact that God ensured that they would have somebody uniquely suited for the task of building the *Mishkan*. Betzalel’s special talents testified to their having earned forgiveness, as God sent them the person they needed to achieve atonement for the golden calf. God therefore instructed Moshe to inform *Benei Yisrael* that God accepted their *teshuva* and actually provided them with the means through which to atone for their misdeed.

According to Rav Simcha Bunim, then, the Midrash here observes that God actively assists us in our effort to correct our own mistakes. Although we are so often the cause of our problems, God helps to facilitate our solutions. Of course, we need to put in considerable efforts and make the sacrifices necessary for this process to succeed – just as *Benei Yisrael* needed to donate materials for the *Mishkan* and participate in the construction effort. But Rav Simcha Bunim reminds us that we need to trust that the Almighty looks favorably upon such efforts and does His part to help ensure our success, despite our failures which made this difficult process necessary.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayakhel (38:8) tells that the *kiyor*, the water basin from which the *kohanim* washed their hands before entering the *Mishkan*, was made from mirrors donated towards the *Mishkan* by the women among *Benei Yisrael*. Rashi, citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, famously comments that Moshe was initially ambivalent about using mirrors, articles used for cosmetic purposes, as part of the *Mishkan*, but God instructed him to include this donation. These mirrors, the Midrash explains, were used by the women in Egypt to adorn themselves and thereby entice their husbands to intimacy. The men would return home from their day of crushing labor physically and emotionally shattered, and the wives are credited with lifting the men’s spirits and ensuring the continued growth of *Benei Yisrael*’s population. God therefore told Moshe that He regarded these mirrors as the most precious of all the materials donated toward the construction of the *Mishkan*.

Rav Dov Weinberger, in his *Shemen Ha-tov*, explains this Midrashic passage in light of the comments of the *Da’at Zekeinim Mi-Ba’alei Ha-Tosafot* earlier (35:27), describing the women’s special enthusiasm for the *Mishkan*. The *Da’at Zekeinim* cites the Midrash’s criticism of the men among *Benei Yisrael*, all of whom happily donated their gold towards the golden calf, but only some of whom parted with their wealth for the purpose of constructing the *Mishkan*. By contrast, the women refused to allow their husbands to donate their jewelry towards the golden calf, but responded with enthusiastic generosity to the call for materials for the *Mishkan*, rushing eagerly to bring their jewelry. Rav Weinberger suggests that this description of the women closely relates to the Midrash’s account of their efforts to encourage their husbands in Egypt. Just as the men felt despair during the period of bondage in Egypt, similarly, they felt discouraged and helpless after the grave incident of *eigel ha-zahav* (the golden calf). It was difficult for them to imagine that God agreed to forgive their misdeed and have His *Shekhina* reside among them. Once again, it was the women who remained upbeat and optimistic, confident in God’s compassion and love for His people. Just as the wives lifted their husbands’ spirits as they suffered physical torment in Egypt, they likewise succeeded in lifting their husbands spirits in the aftermath of the spiritual failure of *cheit ha-eigel*.

On this basis, Rav Weinberger suggests a possible explanation for the famous tradition, noted by the *Da’at Zekeinim*, that in reward for abstaining from the golden calf, the women were given a holiday, of sorts, each Rosh Chodesh. It was customary in some communities for women to refrain from work on Rosh Chodesh, and this holiday was seen as a reward for the women’s refusal to take part in the golden calf. The monthly occasion of Rosh Chodesh, when the moon is at its smallest point and then begins to grow anew, symbolizes hope and optimism, the prospect of growth and recovery after a period of decline. Just as it seems as though the moon would disappear, it begins to enlarge, a process which alludes to the possibility of renewal and rebirth even in situations that seem hopeless. Appropriately, this occasion is associated with the courageous optimism displayed by the women among *Benei Yisrael*, who remained positive, hopeful and optimistic even during the nation’s darkest moments – during the period of physical suffering in Egypt, and in the aftermath of the golden calf.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayakhel tells of *Benei Yisrael*’s enthusiastic response to the call for donations of materials for the *Mishkan*, and we read that they brought their donations each morning – “*ba-boker ba-boker*” (36:3). While this seems to be the plain meaning of the verse, the Gemara in Masekhet Yoma (75a) interprets this phrase differently, explaining that it refers to materials that the people received together with the manna, which fell from the heavens each morning. Specifically, the Gemara tells, precious stones fell together with the manna, and these were used for the special garments of the *kohanim*.

This account also appears in the Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 33:8), which adds that “the leaders among them would come and collect them and hide them.” The “*gedolim*,” theprominent members of the nation, collected these precious jewels and hid them until they were needed for the priestly garments. The *Yefei Toar* commentary to the Midrash explains this to mean that the precious stones fell only with the portions of manna intended for these prominent individuals, and this is why only they collected the jewels. Alternatively, the *Yefei Toar* suggests, Moshe perhaps issued a specific directive authorizing only these leaders to collect the precious stones.

On a symbolic level, there may be an important lesson to learn from the precious stones that accompanied the manna. The daily food rations that miraculously fell from the heavens to feed *Benei Yisrael* in the wilderness are often viewed as symbolic of the perspective we must have on our livelihood – as a gift from above. Unlike our ancestors in the desert, we cannot rely on miraculous sustenance and need to take responsibility for and invest effort in securing our livelihood. Nevertheless, the wilderness experience serves as an eternal reminder that ultimately our sustenance is granted to us by the Almighty, and the success of our efforts depends solely on His will.

This symbolic perspective on the manna should perhaps inform our understanding of the symbolic significance of the precious jewels that accompanied the daily food rations. Just as we are to recognize how God sends us our “manna” – our livelihood – each day, we must also keep our eyes open to the “precious jewels” that He grants us along with our basic sustenance. Every day, “*ba-boker ba-boker*,” we receive both our basic needs as well as many other “extras” that we do not necessarily need for our sustenance. Too often, it is only the “*gedolim*” – those people with special awareness and sensitivity – that recognize and appreciate the gifts that the Almighty showers upon us each day. The rest of us go out to collect our manna, to earn a living and secure our livelihood, but fail to see the “jewels,” the countless precious gifts with which we are blessed.

The Midrash’s account thus teaches us to take note of the many gifts in our lives, and to follow the example of the “*gedolim*” who used these gifts for the *Mishkan*, for the purpose of bringing the Divine Presence into our midst and serving God to the best of our ability.

Thursday

Yesterday, we noted the Torah’s description of *Benei Yisrael* donating materials for the *Mishkan* “*ba-boker ba-boker*” – “each morning” (36:3) after Moshe conveyed to them God’s command to provide materials for the project. The Gemara (Yoma 75a), as we saw, understood the phrase “*ba-boker ba-boker*” as referring to the precious materials that God sent down with the manna, which fell “each morning” to feed *Benei Yisrael*.

The basis for *Chazal*’s Midrashic reading of this phrase is the obvious question that arises as to why the materials were brought specifically in the morning. Seemingly, there was no reason for *Benei Yisrael* to make their donations during one part of the day over any other. Why, then, are they described as bringing the materials for the *Mishkan* specifically in the morning? This question is what led *Chazal* to read the phrase “*ba-boker ba-boker*” as a reference to the manna, rather to the time of day when the donations were made.

Some writers, however, including the *Keli Yakar*, suggested that the description of “*ba-boker ba-boker*” indeed refers to the morning hours, and is intended to underscore the people’s zeal and enthusiasm in this endeavor. Those who wished to donate brought their materials early in the morning, without any delay, testifying to their excitement over the prospect of the Divine Presence residing among the nation.

Rav Shmuel Alter, in his [*Likutei Batar Likutei*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=4116&st=&pgnum=297&hilite=), adds a possible explanation for the unique significance of this quality of zeal in the specific context of the *Mishkan*. Rashi, based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, famously views the *Mishkan* as the means by which *Benei Yisrael* earned atonement for the sin of the golden calf. The tragedy of golden calf resulted from *Benei Yisrael*’s impatience as they waited for Moshe to return from atop Mount Sinai. Seeing that he had not returned when they expected, the people lost patience and despaired, assuming he would never come back. This led them to seek an alternative to Moshe, in the form of idolatrous worship. To atone for their impatience that precipitated the sin of the calf, the people now acted with impatience for a positive cause – rushing to bring their materials for the construction of the *Mishkan*.

This insight teaches us that like virtually all characteristics, impatience and haste can be both destructive and valuable. On the one hand, it can cause us to act recklessly and make imprudent decisions by failing to give careful thought and consideration to our actions. This results in grave mistakes such as the golden calf. But on the other hand, when we feel passionately about an important goal or ideal, our impulsive instincts can drive us to pursue it with vigilance and rigor, raising the prospects of success. The contrast between the golden calf and the donation of materials for the *Mishkan* reflects the balance that needs to be maintained between patience and prudence, on the one hand, and, on the other, passion and zeal in the service of our Creator.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Vayakhel tells of *Benei Yisrael*’s enthusiastic and generous response to God’s command to donate materials for the construction of the *Mishkan*. We read that the artisans assigned over the project informed Moshe that the amount of materials that were donated exceeded the amount needed for the *Mishkan*, and so Moshe issued a call for the people to stop donating.

The *Sefat Emet* suggests an explanation for the message which the Torah may be seeking to convey by relating this incident. Based on the teachings of the *Ba’al Shem Tov*, the *Sefat Emet* comments that excessive giving and performing can oftentimes undermine the desired effects of a *mitzva*. *Mitzva* observance is intended, among other things, to bring us to humble subservience to the divine will. Immoderation, even in the realm of *mitzvot*, can lead to arrogance and can also at times reflect impure motives, such as the desire for recognition. The solution to this dilemma, the *Sefat Emet* writes, is to occasionally pause when involved in a *mitzva* to introspect and determine whether one’s motives are pure, whether he acts sincerely out of a desire to serve his Creator. This way, he ensures to avoid the kind of excessive performance that either leads to or reflects unholy goals.

The *Sefat Emet* suggests that this is the message conveyed through the story of *Benei Yisrael*’s donations to the *Mishkan*. The artisans perceptively feared the ill effects of excessive donations, which could undermine the people’s sincerity and purity of motives, and the people were therefore urged to stop. Citing his grandfather, the *Chiddushei Ha-Rim*, the *Sefat Emet* notes that the word “*va-yikalei*,” which the Torah uses in reference to the people’s discontinuing their donations (36:6), relates to the word “*kil’ayim*” – “mixture.” The people needed to stop donating materials because this would otherwise indicate the presence of impure motives “mixed” together with idealistic motives.

The *Sefat Emet* here teaches us that more is not always better. If we feel driven to extend beyond the strict call of duty and pursue more ambitious goals, this could reflect a sincere drive for moral and religious excellence, but might also reflect the selfish desire to distinguish ourselves and earn respect and recognition. It therefore behooves us to carefully and honestly examine our motives to ensure that the special efforts we invest stem from a genuine desire to achieve, and not from less noble ambitions.