YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF sichot of the rOshei yeshiva**

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This shiur is dedicated le-zekher nishmot Amelia Ray and Morris Ray z"l
on the occasion of their 15th yahrzeits, by their children Allen and Patti Ray

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PARASHAT VAYAKHEL

SICHA OF HARAV MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN

Why Were the People Involved in Building the *Mishkan*?

Adapted by Immanuel Mayer

Translated by Kaeren Fish

After the Golden Calf

*Parashat Vayakhel* documents the building of the *Mishkan*. Aside from the construction itself, there is also a strong emphasis on Bnei Yisrael’s involvement in the process. This idea recurs several times in Shemot chapter 35:

“Take from among you an offering to the Lord; whoever is of a willing heart, let him bring it, an offering of the Lord – gold and silver and brass…” (35:5)

“And every wise-hearted man among you shall come, and make all that the Lord has commanded…” (v. 10)

“And they came – both men and women, as many as were willing of heart, and brought bracelets and earrings, and rings and bracelets, all jewels of gold, and every man that had offered an offering of gold to the Lord.” (v. 22)

“And every man, with whom was found blue, and purple and scarlet and fine linen and goats’ hair and red skins of rams and tachash skins, brought them.” (v. 23)

Why are Bnei Yisrael given such a central place in the creation of the *Mishkan*?

There are many answers to this question; we shall examine three of them. The first two are connected to the location of *parashat Vayakhel* in the Torah: right after the sin of the golden calf.

Involvement in “Tikkun”

The key word capturing the essence of the first answer is “involvement.” Following the sin of the golden calf, the relationship between God and Am Yisrael was damaged. Moshe, in approaching God to seek forgiveness on behalf of the nation, invokes such arguments as, “Why should the Egyptians say…” (Shemot 32:12), and “Remember unto Avraham, Yitzchak and Yisrael” (v. 13). The point remains, however, that the relationship has suffered. One might compare this to a situation in which a spouse has been unfaithful: in order to repair the relationship, there will be a need for joint work and mutual involvement.

In truth, Moshe could have carried out the entire *Mishkan* project on his own, and the Torah would have noted – as indeed it does, later on – “Thus did Moshe; according to all that God commanded him, so he did” (40:16). However, this would have left the relationship between God and Israel in the same unhappy state. Through the participation of the entire nation in the project – arriving with their donations and partaking in the work – a repair of the relationship is effected, representing an atonement of sorts for the sin of the golden calf.

In short, in our *parasha* the Torah repeats all the details of the *Mishkan*, with an emphasis on the involvement of all of Am Yisrael in its construction, so as to show their desire to repair their relationship with God.

From Passivity to Activity

The second answer to the question of the emphasis on Bnei Yisrael’s activity in building the *Mishkan* is that is brings to an end their state of passivity. Up until the giving of the Torah, Bnei Yisrael are not active partners in the process of their own redemption. They do not play an active role in the Exodus from Egypt, nor in accepting the Torah, nor in preparations for the entry into the land. This situation is manifest over and over again.

It is God Who brings them out of Egypt, as described in the Pesach Haggadah:

“‘And I shall pass over the land of Egypt on that night’ – I and not an angel; ‘and I shall smite every firstborn in the land of Egypt’ – I and not a seraph; ‘and I shall execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt’ – I and not a messenger; ‘I the Lord,’ it is I, and none other!”

It is God Who wages war against the Egyptians, as described in the Torah:

“God will fight for you, and you shall remain silent.” (Shemot 14:14)

Moshe brings down the Torah from Mount Sinai:

“And the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and the Lord called Moshe up to the top of the mount, and Moshe went up.” (Shemot 19:20)

“And the Lord said to him, Go, get yourself down, and you shall come up – you and Aharon with you, but let not the kohanim and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest He break forth upon them.” (v. 24)

“And Moshe went down to the people and spoke to them.” (v. 25)

The problem is that this lack of participation, this passivity on the part of Am Yisrael in the process, causes them to take on the behavior of a spoiled child whose mother dotes on him and does everything for him, but when she is not around he is incapable of doing anything for himself. He does not even know what he is supposed to do. Thus, the moment Moshe “leaves” them for a time, they turn to the golden calf (I am adapting this idea from the Beit ha-Levi).

The assumption of responsibility by Bnei Yisrael in the construction of the *Mishkan* is meant to inculcate the consciousness and habit of active participation. The beginning of this change is to be found already in *parashat Teruma*:

“Speak to Bnei Yisrael, that they may bring Me an offering; of every man whose heart prompts him to give shall you take My offering.” (Shemot 25:2)

It continues in *parashat Tetzaveh*:

“And you shall command Bnei Yisrael that they bring you pure oil of olives beaten for the light, to cause the lamp to burn always.” (27:20)

The same idea recurs and is emphasized in our *parasha*:

““Take from among you an offering to the Lord; whoever is of a willing heart, let him bring it, an offering of the Lord – gold and silver and brass…” (35:5)

In other words, the assumption of responsibility comes to repair the previous passivity in the relationship with God. The passivity that led to (or at least allowed) the sin of the golden calf is transformed into very significant action.

Time vs. Place

The third answer is fundamentally different from the previous two. We might preface this answer with a question. At the beginning of *parashat Vayakhel* we find three verses that appear disconnected from the rest of the *parasha*:

“And Moshe gathered all the congregation of Bnei Yisrael together, and said to them: These are the words which the Lord has commanded that you should do them. Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be to you a holy day, a Shabbat of rest unto the Lord; whoever does work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations on the Shabbat day.” (*Shemot* 35:1-3)

These three verses, dealing with the prohibition of labor on Shabbat, come to illuminate and elevate time as a dimension in which God alone rules, and in which man is subservient to Him. These verses are an absolute contrast to the rest of the *parasha*, which is devoted in its entirety to man’s construction of the *Mishkan* and control over it.

If we look at the preceding *parashot*, we see the same concepts occurring in the opposite order: from the beginning of *parashat Teruma* up until the middle of Ki Tisa, the Torah describes the *Mishkan* – the work of human hands. Only afterwards, in the middle of *parashat Ki Tisa*, do we find God’s command concerning Shabbat: “And Bnei Yisrael shall observe the Shabbat…” (Shemot 31:16). Why is the order reversed in our *parasha*?

Before answering this question, let us dwell briefly on the matter of Shabbat.

Time Controls Man

Man cannot influence the passage of time to even the slightest degree. God established time as an iron rule in His world, and man is subservient to it, with no possibility of freeing himself. As our *parasha* states, “Whoever does work on [Shabbat] shall be put to death” (*Shemot* 35:2) – this is an absolute decree of the King; it cannot be transgressed at all. A subject is obliged to obey the ruling of the King; otherwise, he is to be put to death.

This concept of absoluteness is also to be found in Chapter 1 of *Bereishit*, where the creation of man appears as one stage within the process of Creation, which is divided and ordered according to time: “And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good; it there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day” (*Bereishit* 1:31).

Man Controls Space

In contrast, man is control over the space in which he lives; it belongs to him and he has the ability to use it. If a person owns an object or a piece of land, he can do with it as he wishes. This is reflected in the description of Creation in Chapter 2 of Bereishit: “And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and he placed there the man whom He had formed” (*Bereishit* 2:8). Chapter 2 offers no descriptions of time, but rather only of places: “And a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from thence it was parted, and branched into four streams. The name of the first is Pishon; it is that which encompasses the whole land of Chavila, where there is gold” (vv. 10-11).

God gives man the world to rule over it and to carry out His will in it. As Shlomo declares, when he completes the construction of the Temple: “I have surely built You a house to dwell in, a settled place for You to abide in forever” (*Melakhim* I 8:13). Man is capable of building God a home in this world, within his own realm of control, and to sanctify it for God.

Time that is Given to Man’s Control

However, we know that there are ways in which a person can also sanctify time, and therefore bring it under his control – to the extent that God permits this.

The most obvious example is Shabbat. On the one hand, as we know, Shabbat is absolute: it is a day whose sanctity has its source in Creation, when God rested, and therefore we too are commanded to rest. This is a Divine command. Moreover, in our Amida prayer on Shabbat, we do not conclude the special blessing for the day with the words, “Who sanctifies Israel and the Shabbat,” in the same way that on festivals we conclude, “Who sanctifies Israel and the set times.” Rather, we conclude, “Who sanctifies the Shabbat,” without mention of Israel. Shabbat is sanctified by God alone, even without human intervention.

On the other hand, there is also an aspect of Shabbat in which it is Am Yisrael who imbue the day with sanctity. We have a commandment to sanctify Shabbat: “Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it” (*Shemot* 20:8). As we read in *parashat Ki Tisa*:

“And Bnei Yisrael shall keep the Shabbat, to observe the Shabbat throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and Bnei Yisrael forever; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He ceased work and rested.” (*Shemot* 31:16-17)

But there too, just one verse earlier, Shabbat appeared as an absolute command, set down and determined by time:

“Six days may work be done, but on the seventh is the Shabbat of rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the Shabbat day – he shall surely be put to death.” (v. 15)

How can we resolve this contradiction?

Two Aspects of Shabbat

*Parashat Ki Tisa*, in which both aspects of Shabbat appear alongside each other – the absolute Divine command, and the demand that man actively sanctify the Shabbat – presents a model in which God gives man control, as it were, even over the dimension of time. God gives man the possibility of sanctifying time – which is supposed to be the exclusive domain of God.

In *parashat Vayakhel*, the Torah emphasizes that the matters appearing here are separate from man; they lie beyond him, beyond his control and his power. They impose a certain order and certain rules, to which he is subject. The Torah wants to emphasize that time is not given to man. This is a contrast to the *Mishkan*, which symbolizes a realm in which man does have control – space.

Thus, the answer to our original question is that the involvement of Bnei Yisrael in the construction of the *Mishkan* is a contrast to their subjugation to time, as embodied in Shabbat, which takes precedence over the building of the *Mishkan*. As we know, the halakha that the construction of the *Mishkan* or the Temple – as important as it is – does not continue on Shabbat, is indeed deduced from these verses.

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What can man do in order to sanctify time, and thereby – to some extent – to conquer it? Man can sanctify time by using it for purposes that are eternal: Torah, acts of kindness, etc.

Man conquers time when he is not subjugated to it. We must not watch the seconds and hours and days and years going by and say, “We’re going to die anyway,” but rather to dedicate our lives to a worthy aim; to design and mold our own time; not to be passive, but rather to engage actively in worthy activity. That way, every second of our lives is under our own control.