**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

This parasha series is dedicated

in memory of Michael Jotkowitz, z"l.

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PARASHAT VAYAKHEL

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Dedicated Le-Zekher Nishmot Morris Ray and Amelia Ray   
on the Occasion of their yahrzeits

by their children Patti and Allen Ray

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Dedicated in memory of Elliott Horowitz z"l

Elimelech Shimon ben Shraga HaLevi

whose yahrzeit is 20 Adar

by the Horowitz Family  
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**The Mishkan and the Golden Calf**

**By Rav Meir Spiegelman**

"And Moshe gathered all of the congregation of Bnei Yisrael and he said to them, These are the things that God has commanded to do: Six days shall labor be performed, and on the seventh day you shall have a holy day, a Shabbat of rest to God; anyone who performs labor that day shall be put to death…

"And Moshe said to all of the congregation of Bnei Yisrael, saying, This is the thing that God commands, saying: Take from among yourselves a contribution to God; anyone whose heart is willing shall bring it, an offering to God – gold and silver and brass…" (Shemot 35:1-5)

Moshe assembles the entire nation in order to teach them two mitzvot: Shabbat, and contributing to the Mishkan. The gathering of all of Bnei Yisrael is not a common occurrence in the Torah, and therefore right at the start of the parasha we already face a question: why is the entire nation assembled specifically for the purposes of conveying these two commandments?

Moreover, the mitzva of Shabbat is given here neither for the first time nor for the last. Why does the Torah repeat here, once again, the prohibition of performing labor on Shabbat? Chazal answer this question quite simply: the Torah wants to create a connection between the types of labor forbidden on Shabbat and the labor involved in the Mishkan. In other words, all types of labor that were performed in the Mishkan are forbidden on Shabbat. But Chazal may also be alluding to another level of connection, as we shall see below.

**Command and Performance**

At the beginning of parashat Ki Tisa, after the conclusion of the command to build the Mishkan, God commands Moshe concerning Shabbat (Shemot 31:12-17). A number of key-words here are echoed in our parasha: holiness, a Shabbat of rest to God, six days of performing labor, etc.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In my previous shiurim about the Mishkan, my approach followed the opinion that the command to build the Mishkan preceded the sin of the golden calf. We may therefore explain here that the Torah repeats the command about Shabbat in order to complete the parenthetical "frame" and then bring us back to the natural course of events that was halted as a result of the golden calf. There are many instances where the Torah repeats a verse or reference to a certain subject in order to create this type of "frame" around a deviation from the main subject at hand.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is possible that in our parasha, too, the Torah repeats the mitzva of Shabbat in order to turn the episode of the golden calf into a parenthetical aside, while connecting the command to build the Mishkan and the description of its execution.

If we compare the commands concerning Shabbat and the contribution to the Mishkan in our parasha to the corresponding commands in the parashiot of Teruma and Ki Tisa, we can understand why these two subjects, specifically, were raised at an assembly of all of Bnei Yisrael. In parashat Teruma, when God commands Moshe concerning donations for the Mishkan, He tells him explicitly, "SPEAK TO BNEI YISRAEL and let them take a contribution to Me…" (Shemot 25:2). Similarly, in parashat Ki Tisa, in the command concerning Shabbat, God explicitly tells Moshe, "And you – SPEAK TO BNEI YISRAEL SAYING – but My Shabbats you shall observe" (Shemot 31:13). Obviously, Moshe taught Bnei Yisrael all of the Torah; hence the explicit command, "Speak to Bnei Yisrael" represents an instruction to gather all of the nation and to address them all together. Hence, at the beginning of our parasha, Moshe gathers the entire nation and teaches them the mitzva of Shabbat and the obligation of donating towards the Mishkan.

**Location of the Golden Altar**

Last week we discussed the consequences of the sin of the golden calf: the "external" consequences (inscription on the Tablets by Moshe instead of by God Himself), as well as the "internal" consequences (inter alia, a change in the form of God's guidance of the nation). If God indeed commanded Bnei Yisrael to build the Mishkan before the sin of the golden calf, it is quite reasonable to assume that the sin left an impression on the Mishkan endeavor.

In order to understand the influence of the golden calf on the construction of the Mishkan, we must compare the commands concerning the Mishkan that preceded the sin with the actual construction that followed it. If we discover discrepancies, then we must ascertain whether they result from the sin.

The most obvious (and perhaps most important) difference between the command concerning the Mishkan and its actual execution is, without doubt, to be found in the incense altar. The commentators address the strange location of this command – at the end of parashat Tetzaveh (Shemot 30:1-10), after the commands concerning the garments of the kohanim, their sanctification and the daily sacrifice, rather than in what would seem a more appropriate place: among the commands relating to the various Mishkan vessels. Most commentators agree that the incense altar was not an integral part of the Mishkan (indeed, Halakha reflects this reality) and therefore its construction is commanded only at the end of all the other commands related to the Mishkan.

However, we could adopt a slightly different approach: perhaps God commanded the construction of the incense altar only after the sin of the golden calf. In the description of the actual building of the Mishkan, the construction of the incense altar is recorded in the appropriate place (Shemot 37:25-28). Thus we may postulate that the Torah mentions the command of the incense altar at the end of parashat Tetzaveh as an appendix to the commands related to the Mishkan, in order to complete them; however, the incense altar is distinguished from the other vessels in that it was commanded only after the sin of the golden calf. As we shall see further on, we can provide proof for this view.

In parashat Ki Tisa, when the Torah commands the blending of incense (30:34-38), there is no mention of Aharon or his sons; it is offered only by Moshe. In keeping with the view I am proposing, the reason is clear: in the beginning, before the golden calf, there was never any intention of having an incense altar, and so Aharon and his sons were not meant to offer any incense. Hence, at the beginning of parashat Ki Tisa, before the sin of the golden calf, there is no mention of them doing so.

Moreover, the purpose of the incense is to serve as a barrier in front of the revelation of the Divine Presence. Therefore, the Kohen Gadol offers incense on Yom Kippur ("I shall appear in a cloud above the covering"), and for the same reason it is specifically incense that serves as the barrier halting the destruction that begins to spread amongst the nation following the rebellion of Korach and his cohorts. When Moshe comes to speak with God, he must offer incense, for he enters the Kodesh ha-Kodashim (Holy of Holies), behind the curtain, and he must produce a screen of incense that will separate between himself and the Ark. There is no real need to offer incense when entering only the Kodesh (the Sanctuary, as opposed to the Kodesh ha-Kodashim), for the curtain serves as a partition between the Kodesh and the Ark.

However, this situation changed following the sin of the golden calf. The Torah once again repeats the fact that Aharon is – at least partially – responsible for the sin: upon Moshe's descent from the mountain he sees that "the nation was in disorder, for AHARON HAD MADE THEM DISORDERLY to the scandal of their enemies." The Torah itself testifies that "God plagued the nation FOR THEIR HAVING MADE THE CALF THAT AHARON MADE." His partial responsibility for the sin leads to a fundamental change in Aharon's status. While at first God wanted Aharon to be the Kohen Gadol, there was now a difficult problem involved in awarding that position to the person who had played a part in causing such a grave sin. Therefore, following the golden calf, Aharon was required to offer incense every time he came to the Ohel Mo'ed, in order to create an additional barrier between himself and the Ark. The need for the golden incense altar, then, was a direct result of the sin of the golden calf.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**The Days of Inauguration**

Indeed, the need for atonement for the golden calf is a most obvious motif in the process of Aharon's training and preparation. On the eighth day, the Torah narrates, Aharon brought a calf as a sin offering (Vayikra 9:2). In all of the Torah, nowhere do we find another instance of a calf brought as a sin offering. It appears, therefore, that this calf was brought by Aharon in order to atone for the sin of the calf, for which he was partially to blame.

Having come this far, we can now point to another process that came about, apparently, only in the wake of the golden calf: the first seven days of inauguration of the Mishkan. As we know, during these seven days Moshe served as the kohen in the Ohel Mo'ed. But why was it specifically Moshe who was chosen to perform the Divine service during these days? Why could Aharon not have begun his service during these seven days? After all, Moshe had no advantage of prior training.

In order to answer this question, we must remember that the Torah makes no mention of sin offerings at all until the sin of the golden calf. It seems that the whole category of sin offerings is firmly bound up with the fact that God foregoes punishment for the sin of the calf, decreeing instead: "On the day when I punish, I shall visit their sin upon them" (Shemot 32:34). As Rashi (ad loc.) comments:

"Always, always, when I visit their transgressions upon them, I shall visit a little of this sin, too, together with the other transgressions. There is no suffering that comes to Israel that does not contain a little of the punishment for the sin of the golden calf."

Following the sin of the calf, Bnei Yisrael were commanded to bring sin offerings for all generations, in order to atone each time for the same sin. Similarly, the command concerning the sin offerings that were brought during the seven days of inauguration was also a result of the sin of the calf. Were it not for that sin, Moshe would not have needed to function as a kohen.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This last assertion, too, has support in the text. In the command concerning the basin, we read: "And Aharon and his sons shall wash their hands and feet from it" (Shemot 30:19). In contrast, when the basin is actually made, we read: "And MOSHE and Aharon and his sons washed their hands and their feet" (40:31). In the beginning, Moshe was not supposed to serve in the Ohel Mo'ed at all, and therefore he was not required to sanctify his hands and feet. In the wake of the golden calf, after Aharon's sin, it became necessary for Aharon to atone for his sin during the seven days of inauguration during which Moshe served as the kohen. Therefore, when it came to making the basin – at the end of Sefer Shemot – we are told that Moshe, too, would sanctify his hands and feet when he came to serve in the Mishkan.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**The Command Concerning the Half-Shekel**

At the beginning of the parasha of Teruma, the Torah teaches that Bnei Yisrael were required to contribute towards the Mishkan – each person in accordance with his ability. The Torah does not stipulate that each person must give a half-shekel: "From every person whose heart prompts him shall you take My offering." Only in parashat Ki Tisa, after the command about the Mishkan, do we find the first mention of the requirement to raise a half-shekel from each individual. Why, then, does the Torah not mention this contribution in parashat Teruma?

This question joins two other questions that arise in the wake of the command to collect the half-shekel donations. Firstly, the Torah asserts that the half-shekel serves as atonement for Bnei Yisrael when they are counted, "So that there will not be a plague amongst them when they are counted."[[6]](#footnote-6) But why is there any need for this atonement? Moreover, the money collected from the half-shekel donations was enough for Betzalel to fashion the sockets and the pillars of the courtyard (38:25-28), which were the only two vessels in the Mishkan that were made of silver. Why, then, were Bnei Yisrael required to donate "gold and silver and brass"? What did they do with the silver that was collected?

To all the questions posed here, we may present a single all-inclusive answer: the parasha of the half-shekel, like those of the incense altar and the days of inauguration, came after the sin of the golden calf. As atonement for Bnei Yisrael's readiness to donate towards the calf, there was a need for voluntarism for the opposite cause – to build the Mishkan. Moreover, every time Bnei Yisrael got together and mobilized for some specific purpose, there was a need to collect a half-shekel from each one, as atonement for having mobilized to create the golden calf.

But this law, of collecting a half-shekel in order to atone for the mobilization to create the calf, is given for all generations. In that generation, Bnei Yisrael were required to donate the half-shekel even though there was no real need to count them (for nowhere do we find the results of such a census; we discover only the sum total of the half-shekels, in parashat Pekudei).[[7]](#footnote-7) God required of that generation that sinned in creating the calf to declare that they gave their allegiance to the Mishkan, and not to a calf. For this reason, they were required to contribute a half-shekel – as atonement for their contribution towards the calf.

Betzalel used the silver that was collected from all the half-shekels to build the sockets and the pillars of the Mishkan courtyard. Indeed, nothing could be more fitting than for Bnei Yisrael to contribute specifically these parts of the Mishkan – for the courtyard is the only area of the Mishkan where Bnei Yisrael are permitted to enter. Hence it is specifically there that they can atone, for all generations, for their sin.

**Who Built the Mishkan**

We may add one further fundamental change concerning the Mishkan that came about as a result of the golden calf. When God commands that the Mishkan is to be built, there is no mention of who is to build it. We would probably guess that Aharon should build it: his job is to be responsible for the Mishkan, and therefore it would seem logical that he should be in charge of its construction. Obviously, Aharon could entrust the actual, technical building job to the relevant professionals (such as Betzalel), but it would seem appropriate that he oversee the construction. But in practice, the Torah places Betzalel and Oholiav in charge of the building, as representatives of the nation as a whole. Betzalel is from the tribe of Yehuda, representing the first triad of tribes, while Oholiav is from the tribe of Dan, representing the last triad. Thus, the Torah transfers responsibility for building the Mishkan from Aharon to all of Am Yisrael.

This situation has dual significance. Firstly, Aharon cannot build the Mishkan because of his part in the sin of the golden calf. Secondly, Am Yisrael must build the Mishkan as atonement for that same sin.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**The Status of the Pillars for the Screen**

In conclusion, let us note another discrepancy between command and execution concerning the Mishkan – this time, one that is not necessarily related to the sin of the golden calf.

In parashat Teruma we are told that the pillars for the screen are to be covered with gold, while in parashat Vayakhel we read that they are "ringed" with gold – i.e., not completely covered but rather decorated with gold rings (like the pillars of the courtyard, which are ringed with silver). This change may indicate a change in the status of the courtyard screen. If the pillars are considered part of the Mishkan, it is appropriate that they be covered with gold, like the pillars of the Mishkan. But if these pillars are only ringed with gold, then apparently they belong to the courtyard – where the pillars are ringed.

It is possible that, along with this change, the location of the screen was also changed. In the command concerning the Mishkan, the screen is to be placed outside of the pillars; therefore the pillars are within the Mishkan – i.e., inwards of the screen. In parashat Vayakhel, it seems, the screen hangs on the inner part of the pillars, such that the pillars stand at its outer part: i.e., in the courtyard. This may represent a distancing of the screen from the people, for upon the screen is a depiction of the keruvim, symbolizing the Divine Presence. Hence, this distancing, too, may be a result of the sin of the golden calf.

We may summarize as follows: there are two different approaches among the Rishonim, and both are the "words of the living God." The nation was commanded to build the Mishkan prior to the golden calf, but was commanded again thereafter. The Mishkan as projected before the sin is not the same Mishkan that was build in reality: it differs in the identity of the builders, in those who serve within it and their contribution, and even in its parts. Like the spiritual status of the nation, the Mishkan – the place where God meets with Moshe to convey the Torah to Bnei Yisrael – is severely affected by the sin of the golden calf.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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1. Chazal also hint at this parallel. The Gemara (Shabbat 70a) records a dispute as to why the Torah gives a special, explicit prohibition against kindling fire on Shabbat ("You shall not kindle fire in all your dwelling places on Shabbat day"). The opinion that "kindling comes to teach" – in other words, the Torah explicitly prohibits one category of labor in order to teach that a person who transgresses one of the forbidden types of labor is punishable for that labor in its own right – hints at the parallel between the two commands concerning Shabbat. In parashat Ki Tisa, we are told not to perform any type of labor, while in our parasha we are told not to kindle a fire, and from this we deduce that the prohibition in our parasha illustrates the general prohibition in parashat Ki Tisa. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One of the clearest examples appears in the order of the Yom Kippur service, where the discussion about the two goats is enclosed on each side with the words, "And he shall atone for himself and for his household." See in this regard Rav Mordechai Breuer's "Pirkei Mo'adot." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Moshe (like the Kohen Gadol for all future generations), when entering the Kodesh ha-Kodashim, did not offer the incense upon the golden altar, but rather entered with the incense pan in his hand. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Therefore God did not command him to wear special clothes when functioning as the kohen. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. According to the view presented here, Moshe sanctified his hands and feet only when entering to serve during the seven days of inauguration. However, it is possible that Moshe would sanctify his hands and feet whenever he entered in order to speak with God. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The half-shekels were not used, as is commonly believed, as a means of conducting a census of Bnei Yisrael. Throughout all future generations, no one counted the half-shekels that were collected each year. Likewise, women and minors could also donate (if they so wished). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The census recorded at the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar was conducted after the establishment of the Mishkan, while the collection of the half-shekels recorded in parashat Ki Tisa took place prior to the building; the silver accumulated from the half-shekels was in fact used for the building. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. When Moshe tells Am Yisrael that God has chosen Betzalel to build the Mishkan, we detect in the text a note of persuasion, as though this was not a popular decision. The Torah may be hinting that Bnei Yisrael would have preferred that Aharon build the Mishkan, rather than representatives of the nation. As when Bnei Yisrael approached Aharon, asking that he make them a god, here too the nation was fundamentally convinced that all acts related to Divine worship should be performed by kohanim. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)