**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYAKHEL – PEKUDEI**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

One of the special garments worn by the *kohen gadol* was the *me’il* (robe), which was made with an extra lining around the neck to ensure it would not tear (“*lo yikarei’a*” – 39:23). The Gemara in Masekhet Yoma (72a) comments on the basis of this feature of the *me’il* that tearing one of the *bigdei kehuna* (priestly vestments) constitutes a Torah violation. Although this command was issued specifically in reference to the *me’il*, it in truth applies to all *bigdei kehuna*.

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Yalkut Yehuda* (Parashat Tetzaveh), suggests explaining the significance of this command, and why it is introduced specifically in regard to the *me’il*, in light of the symbolic meaning of the *bigdei kehuna* developed by Rav Yitzchak Arama, in his *Akeidat Yitzchak*. Rav Yitzchak Arama claims that the beautiful priestly garments symbolize our *middot*, our character traits. Just as a *kohen* is required to wear the special *bigdei kehuna* while serving God in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, similarly, we must perform our service of God while “donned” with fine character traits. If we conduct ourselves discourteously, arrogantly, dishonestly or insensitively as we perform *mitzvot*, then our service is invalid and unacceptable – just as a *kohen*’s service is invalid if it is performed without the special *bigdei kehuna*. In light of this symbolism, Rav Ginsburg writes, we easily understand the significance of the prohibition against tearing one of the priestly garments. We are to preserve our characters and not allow them to be tainted or corrupted. A prerequisite for our service of God is the effort to keep our characters intact, to remain honest, kind and well-mannered in all settings and under all circumstances. These qualities are the “garments” that we must wear as loyal servants of God, just as the beautiful *bigdei kehuna* are worn by God’s attendants in the *Mikdash*. Like the *kohanim*, we are to carefully preserve these “garments” and pay close attention to ensure that our characters are never “torn,” that they are never soiled or contaminated.

Rav Ginsburg adds that this might explain the specific relevance of the neckline of the *me’il* in this regard. The Torah introduced the prohibition against tearing the priestly garments in the context of the requirement to reinforce the thin edge of the neckline of the *me’il* with a special lining, because this material was more vulnerable to tearing. The Torah forbids tearing any part of any of the priestly garments, but it introduces a unique provision requiring adding a lining to reinforce the part of the *me’il* that might otherwise be susceptible to ripping. Symbolically, Rav Ginsburg writes, this requirement represents the need to take special precautions in areas of particular weakness. We are to know ourselves and identify those aspects of our characters which are more vulnerable, and make a special effort to ensure that they are not “torn,” that our characters remain as close to perfect as possible.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Vayakhel (38:3) lists several different sets of utensils that were made in conjunction with the altar outside the *Mishkan*, including the “*mizrakot*.” Rashi (27:3) explains that this refers to the containers that were used for collecting the blood of sacrifices after the animal was slaughtered, and then for transporting the blood to the altars.

The Mishna in Masekhet Pesachim (64a), amidst its description of the offering of the nation’s paschal sacrifices on the eve of Pesach, mentions that the containers were specifically made in a manner that they could not stand on their own. These utensils grew narrower from the top down, and had pointed bottoms, such that they were unable to stand. The reason for this shape, the Mishna explains, is to prevent the *kohanim* from putting the containers on the ground after the blood is collected, before it is sprinkled and poured as is required. The concern was that if the *kohanim* put the container down to rest, the blood would congeal and thus be unable to be sprinkled. The containers were thus constructed in such a manner that prevented the *kohanim* from putting them down before completing the process.

Rav Ovadya of Bartenura, in his commentary to this Mishna, explains, “They were wide on top and their bottoms were pointed so that they could not sit on the ground, lest the *kohanim* place them to sit on the ground until they collect other blood, **since there were many [sacrifices]**, and they will forget them and the blood would congeal.” It seems from this explanation that this concern arose specifically on Pesach eve, when, as the Mishna there describes, there was a frenzy of activity in the Temple courtyard, as the entire nation offered their *pesach* sacrifices. The *kohanim* would likely be overwhelmed by the thousands of sacrifices to which they needed to attend, and there was thus the concern that a *kohen* might put down a container a blood while he collects blood from other sacrifices, and then forget about the first container of blood, which would congeal in the interim. One might assume, then, that the containers used on other occasions in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* did not have to be this shape.

Whether or not this was indeed the intent of Rav Ovadya of Bartenura, the Gemara later (64b) cites a passage from the Tosefta (Menachot 11:7) which clearly indicates otherwise. The Tosefta comments that all containers used in the *Mikdash* were made with pointed bottoms, except the bowls used to hold the frankincense which was added to the *lechem ha-panim* (showbread). This would certainly suggest that the Mishna’s remark regarding the containers used for the blood of the paschal sacrifice applied to all the sacrifices. Likewise, the *Midrash Ha-gadol* identifies the “*mizrakot*” mentioned in the Torah as containers used for collecting sacrificial blood, and adds that they were made with pointed bottoms so that the *kohanim* could not put them down. This, too, implies that all the containers were made this way, and not only the containers used for the paschal offering.

On a symbolic level, this *halakha* might perhaps serve to instruct about the importance of focus and attentiveness when tending to a task. Just as *Chazal* were concerned that a *kohen* might leave and then neglect a sacrifice’s blood to go tend to a different sacrifice, we are likewise prone to being distracted and losing focus. Life – and certainly Torah life – imposes upon us many different demands and obligations, and it is certainly important to be mindful of the full range of responsibilities that require our attention. At the same time, however, we must try to ensure that this range of responsibilities does not lead us to neglect the responsibility to which we tend at any given moment. Even as we seek to be mindful of the our many different obligations, we must give each one our full attention and fulfill it to the best of our ability.

Monday

The Gemara in Masekhet Megilla (10b) tells that according tradition, the *aron* (ark) in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* had a miraculous quality, in that it occupied no space in the *kodesh ha-kodashim* (the inner chamber of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*). If one would measure from either side of the ark to the nearest wall, he would find that the distance was precisely half the distance from one wall to the next. Somehow, the ark did not take up any of the space.

A classic Chassidic insight into this miracle is cited in the name of the *Sefat Emet*. Everything in the *Mishkan*, as we read in Parashat Vayakhel, was contributed by generous donors. Moshe conveyed to the people God’s command that materials be collected for the *Mishkan*’s construction, and the people responded with such generosity and enthusiasm that Moshe was forced to command the people to stop bringing donations (36:4-7). The *Sefat Emet* noted that the miraculous quality of the *aron* – its standing in the *Mishkan* without occupying space – also needed to be “donated.” This aspect of the *Mishkan*, like all the others, originated from the people’s donations. The *Sefat Emet* explained that this miracle was “donated” through the sincere desire of those who were unable to contribute materials. There were, presumably, less privileged members of *Benei Yisrael* who lacked the wherewithal to make donations to the *Mishkan*, and there were also those who were blocked from donating once Moshe announced that no more materials be brought. These people genuinely wished to participate in the effort, but were barred from doing so due to circumstances. The *Sefat Emet* posited that in truth, they did participate – their sincerity, their feelings and emotions, their heartfelt desire to give and contribute, lent the *Mishkan* its miraculous quality, enabling it to stand without occupying any space.

The message conveyed by this insight is that our contributions and achievements cannot always be measured in tangible, quantitative terms. All of us, in one way or another, resemble those members of *Benei Yisrael* who were unable to donate materials to the *Mishkan*. We all wish we could do more, could accomplish more, could contribute more, could have a greater impact, and could reach greater heights. The *Sefat Emet* here teaches us that as long as our desire is sincere, our frustrated ambitions are precious and make a meaningful contribution. The “*Mishkan*” – the spiritual fabric of *Am Yisrael* – is comprised of not only tangible elements, but also an abstract quality, a certain aura and feeling of holiness. And this aura is enhanced by our sincere desire to grow, improve and achieve. Even though we so often fall short of our expectations of ourselves, the expectations themselves have great value, profoundly impacting upon the overall feel and atmosphere of the “*Mishkan*” that our nation is expected to build. Rather than feel distraught and discouraged by our limitations and failures, we should instead recognize that every bit of effort we invest and sincere desire we feel has a significant impact and constitutes a vitally important contribution to *Am Yisrael*.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Pekudei that when Moshe saw that the *Mishkan* and its furnishings had been constructed in accordance with God’s commands, he blessed the people (“*va-yevarekh otam Moshe*” – 39:43). Rashi, based on *Chazal* (in *Torat Kohanim*, Shemini), tells us the text of Moshe’s blessing: “May it be His will that the *Shekhina* should reside in your handiwork.” The simple meaning of this blessing is that as the artisans built the *Mishkan* in strict accordance with God’s commands, it was worthy of fulfilling its intended purpose – serving as a residence for the divine presence, as God initially said, “They shall make for Me a Sanctuary, and I shall reside among them” (25:8).

Rav Shlomo of Radomsk, however, in *Tiferet Shlomo*, suggests a different reading of this blessing. He writes that the phrase “*ma’aseh yedeikhem*” (“your handiwork”) in Moshe’s blessing refers not to the *Mishkan*, but rather to the people’s ordinary, daily pursuits and activities. Moshe wished the people that in the merit of their generous contributions to the construction of the *Mishkan*, they should enjoy blessing and prosperity in all their day-to-day endeavors. The *Tiferet Shlomo* further explains that Moshe here admonished the people to ensure that all their “handiwork” should be conducted in a sacred manner, that the construction of the *Mishkan* should affect everything they do, inspiring them to elevate all their activities to a higher plane.

The *Tiferet Shlomo*’s reading of Moshe’s blessing seeks to dispel the possible misconception that the designation of a site as a place of holiness means that sanctity cannot be experienced elsewhere. The concept of a *Mishkan*, an earthly abode of the divine presence, could be misconstrued as an indication that spirituality and sanctity are reserved for that location, and cannot be achieved anywhere else. The *Tiferet Shlomo* thus emphasizes that although God’s presence “resided” in the *Mishkan*, the objective of the *Mishkan* was to enhance the spiritual quality of all of *Benei Yisrael*’s lives. The *Mishkan* signified the notion that God resided among the people because they lived in an especially dignified and Godly manner. His “residence” in the *Mishkan* served not to negate the significance of all other locations, but to the contrary, to motivate the people to maintain the highest standards in everything they did.

The message being conveyed is that holiness is achieved not merely by allocating time for sacred endeavors, but by conducting ourselves in all areas of life on a special level of spiritual awareness. The sanctity of the “*Mishkan*,” of our religious institutions and our purely religious undertakings, must permeate the totality of our lives, and lead us to conduct all our affairs in a manner befitting the people among whom the Almighty has chosen to reside.

Wednesday

Parashat Vayakhel begins with Moshe assembling *Benei Yisrael* to convey to them God’s instructions for building the *Mishkan* (preceded by the command to observe Shabbat). The Torah does not tell us where Moshe spoke to the people, but Ibn Ezra (35:20) understood from the description of the people’s departure after the assembly – “The entire congregation of Israel left Moshe’s presence” – that this assembly took place in the *Ohel Mo’ed* (“Tent of Meeting”). Ibn Ezra refers here to the Torah’s earlier reference to Moshe’s tent, which was given the name “*Ohel Mo’ed*” and where people would go when they needed Moshe’s prophetic guidance (33:7). According to Ibn Ezra, it was in this tent where Moshe gathered the people to tell them about God’s instructions concerning the *Mishkan*. It stands to reason that this tent was not nearly large enough to accommodate the entire nation, and it is, presumably, for this reason that Ibn Ezra added that Moshe addressed the people in small groups, one at a time (“*kat achar kat*”).

A later Spanish commentator, Rav Avraham Saba, took a different view. In his *Tzeror Ha-mor* (to 35:20), Rav Saba writes in reference to this assembly, “This is one of the places where the few took hold of the many.” Meaning, according to the *Tzeror Ha-mor*, this assembly was held in miraculous fashion, as the entire nation was able to gather in the small confines of Moshe’s tent. (See *Torah Sheleima* to 35:20, note 65.)

If so, then we might wonder about the possible significance of this miracle. Why was it important for this gathering, in which Moshe informed the people of God’s command to construct a *Mishkan*, be held this way, with the entire nation supernaturally standing together inside Moshe’s tent?

One answer, perhaps, is that this aspect of the assembly points to a special “miraculous” quality of the *Mishkan* – namely, that it could accommodate and serve all the many different members of the nation. The *Mishkan* occupied a relatively small area, and its rituals followed a very specific set of detailed laws, and yet it was the sole site of sacrificial offerings for all *Benei Yisrael*. In a sense, this quality characterizes Torah life generally – as it is, on the one hand, specific and inflexible, yet it also allows room for all kinds of people and their countless different personalities, backgrounds and styles. Torah is, ironically, both rigid and accommodating. It sets definite limitations on theology and practice, yet it provides enough room within those limitations for a range of different styles. The miracle of all *Benei Yisrael* assembling in Moshe’s tent when hearing about the *Mishkan* thus might reflect the miracle of the “*Mishkan*” itself, how religious life sets limits while still allowing room for each person’s individual expression and unique contribution to the beautiful “sanctuary” which we are to work together to build.

Thursday

The opening verse of Parashat Pekudei refers to the *Mishkan* with the phrase “*mishkan ha-eidut*,” indicating that it functioned as a type of “testimony” (“*eidut*”). The simple explanation of this term, as explained by Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni, is that the *Mishkan* contained in its midst – in the ark situated in its innermost chamber – the stone tablets given to Moshe at Sinai. The tablets are referred to as “testimony” earlier in Sefer Shemot, likely because they represent – and thus testify to – the covenant forged between God and *Benei Yisrael* at Mount Sinai (see, for example, the Rashbam to 25:16).

Rashi, however, citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, offers a different explanation of the term “*mishkan ha-eidut*,” writing that the *Mishkan* testified to God’s having forgiven *Benei Yisrael* for the sin of the golden calf. The fact that God’s presence resided in the *Mishkan* among *Benei Yisrael* clearly demonstrated that they were forgiven for this grave transgression and were again deemed worthy of His presence.

This approach to the “testimony” provided by the *Mishkan* is developed somewhat differently by the *Sefat Emet* (Pekudei, 5635). He writes that the “testimony” came from the people’s faithful fulfillment of God’s detailed commands regarding the *Mishkan*’s construction. The fact that the people obeyed every instruction and built the *Mishkan* in precise accordance with God’s will testified to their having been loyal to God all along, notwithstanding the grave mistake of the golden calf. This sin did not reflect a breakdown of their core religious essence, which remained firmly and passionately devoted to the Almighty. This devotion was on full display when *Benei Yisrael* enthusiastically parted with their possessions for the purpose of constructing the *Mishkan* and completing the project in precise accordance with God’s commands.

The concept of the *Mishkan* “testifying” to *Benei Yisrael*’s devotion to God perhaps applies to us on an individual level, as well. We are all well aware of the numerous “testimonies” to our faults and flaws. We all have uncomfortable memories of mistakes and failures that remind us of our frailty, our limitations and our weaknesses. The Torah’s use of the term “*mishkan ha-eidut*” perhaps teaches us to be also mindful of the other “testimonies” – our successes, achievements and positive traits that “testify” to our inner goodness and potential. We all have our share of “golden calves” – past mistakes which we regret – but we can also all point to many “*Mishkans*” – significant achievements that “testify” to all the good within us. Just as the Torah emphasizes the “testimony” to *Benei Yisrael*’s inner goodness provided by the *Mishkan*, so must we be mindful not only of our mistakes and failures, but also of our achievements and successes which testify to our potential and which should thus encourage us to achieve even more.

Friday

One of the special garments worn by the *kohen gadol* was the *me’il* (robe), which featured along its bottom hem a series of bells and decorations in the form of pomegranates. The commentators disagree in explaining how precisely the bells and pomegranates were arranged. Rashi, commenting to Parashat Tetzaveh (28:33-34), explains that they were arranged in alternating fashion, such that every bell was positioned in between two pomegranates, and every pomegranate was situated in between two bells. The Ramban (28:31), however, disputes Rashi’s explanation and maintains that the bells were embedded within the hollow pomegranates. In other words, the pomegranates served as the casing around the bells.

*Chatam Sofer*, commenting to Parashat Pekudei (39:25), notes that two adjacent verses appear to support both opinions. The Torah (there in Parashat Pekudei) describes how the artisans “placed the bells inside the pomegranates” (“*Va-yitenu et ha-pa’amonim be-tokh ha-rimonim*”), clearly indicating that the bells were embedded within the pomegranates. The next verse, however, states, “A bell and a pomegranate; a bell and a pomegranate” – suggesting that they were arranged alongside one another, in alternating fashion, as Rashi explained. In light of these conflicting implications, *Chatam Sofer* proposes (albeit with some reluctance, writing, “*Lulei de-mistafina hayiti omer*”) a creative theory, suggesting that both interpretations are correct: the *me’il* was lined with two sets of bells – bells embedded within pomegranate-shaped decorations, and bells that hung from the *me’il* on their own, without any casing around them. They were arranged alongside one another in alternating fashion, with every bell surrounded by two pomegranates that had bells inside them.

To explain the significance of these two sets of bells, *Chatam Sofer* cites the Gemara’s well-known comment in Masekhet Arakhin (16a) that the *me’il* served to atone for the particular transgression of *lashon ha-ra* – speaking negatively about other people. *Chatam Sofer* suggests that this prohibition includes not only negative speech about other people, but also inappropriate self-praise. Speaking of one’s own positive qualities, *Chatam Sofer* posits, is forbidden just like speaking of other people’s negative qualities, and these two forms of *lashon ha-ra* are symbolized by the two sets of bells lining the bottom of the *me’il*. The bells that were open and exposed correspond to the familiar form of *lashon ha-ra* – spreading negative information about other people – whereas the bells encased by pomegranates allude to the sin of self-adulation. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 37a) famously points to the pomegranate as a symbol of the fact that people are “filled with *mitzvot*.” Just as the pomegranate contains a large number of sweet-tasting seeds, so are all *Am Yisrael* filled with beautiful qualities and great achievements. The image of a pomegranate with a bell inside it, *Chatam Sofer* suggests, thus symbolizes those who broadcast their good deeds, who find it necessary to make their achievements public through boasting. Such conduct falls under the prohibition of *lashon ha-ra*, and thus the *me’il* was lined with two different sets of bells to atone for the two different, but equally grave, forms of this prohibition.

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