

The Tent of Meeting and the Tabernacle

A D'var Torah on *Parashat P'kudei* (Ex. 38:21 – 40:38)

By Alan I. Friedman

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“These are the accounts of the Tabernacle (the Tabernacle of the Pact), which were calculated by Moses’ order....”

In some calendar years (but not in 2005), the parashiot of *Vayak’heil* and *P’kudei* are read together. *Parashat Vayak’heil* begins with the words, “*Vayak’heil Moshe et-kol-adat b’nei-Yisrael....*,” “Moses gathered the entire Israelite community....” And *Parashat P’kudei* opens with, “*Eileh fekudei haMishkan Mishkan ha-eidut asher pukad al-pi Moshe....*” “These are the accounts of the Tabernacle (the Tabernacle of the Pact), which were calculated by Moses’ order....”

If, at first glance, *Parashat Vayak’heil* seems familiar, it is because it describes the people putting into effect the instructions that were previously given in *Parashat Ki Tisa*. Stirred by the prospect of God’s ongoing presence in their midst, the people had given of their wealth unstintingly. At Moses’ bidding, the people brought all of the required materials, and the craftsmen began to do the work. But, before work actually began, Moses reminded everyone, once again, to maintain the Sabbath, emphasizing especially the prohibition against kindling fire.

Parashat P’kudei, the final parashah of the Book of Exodus, begins with Moses’ full accounting of all the materials contributed by the people for the construction of the *Mishkan*. First he inventoried all of the building materials and then all of the vestments of the Priests. Even though all of the materials, including the precious metals of immense value, had been under the direct supervision of Moses and Bezalel — two men of indisputable integrity — Moses recognized that leaders must be beyond reproach. They must not rely on estimates and approximations, but must keep accurate records of all goods and monies that pass through their hands.¹

Moses knew that confidence in a leader entrusted with public funds requires transparency.² Therefore, in taking the necessary steps to remain unblemished in the eyes of his constituents — like appointing Itamar, the son of Aaron the High Priest, to perform the audit — Moses set an example for future leaders of Israel.

¹ *The Chumash: The Stone Edition*; Edited by Rabbis Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz; Mesorah Publications, Ltd.; 1993; p. 530.

² Commentary by Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, 2003.

Once the work had been completed in accordance with God's instructions, Moses inspected the *Mishkan* and blessed the people. Then the *Mishkan* was assembled for the first time, and the Divine Presence, manifest as a cloud, filled the sanctuary, serving as a guide for the people.

At this point, there were two embodiments of holiness in the Israelite camp: the Tent of Meeting (*Ohel Mo-eid*) and the Tabernacle (*Mishkan*). We can think of them as representing a theology of encounter and a theology of presence. At times, such as a death, a wedding, or the birth of a child, God erupts into our lives with an intensity that lifts us to an emotional plane too high to be lived on constantly. At other times, such as during meaningful relationships, child rearing, and periods of good health, God is a constant in an equally real but less intense manner. Indeed in the *Etz Hayim* commentary³, the two holy places in the Israelite camp are likened to the two types of God encounters we experience in our lives: the intense and the ever-present.

Toward the end of *P'kudei*, there appears to be some confusion. At times the *Ohel Mo-eid* seems to be situated within the *Mishkan*, while at other times the two seem hardly distinguishable. In Exodus 40:29, to add to the confusion, the term "Tabernacle of the Tent of Meeting" appears. What's going on?

Critical analysts of the Torah suggest that this is one of areas where many stories, written by many different authors over a span of several hundred years, were woven together. One school of writers was striving to create a literary record of our people's earliest history. Another school — the ones who authored the stories of the Tabernacle and the Tent of Meeting — were probably priestly writers who were concerned with preserving and justifying the important role of priestly rituals in Israelite history.

Furthermore, some Torah scholars believe that the detailed descriptions in *Vayak'heil* and *P'kudei* actually are about the accoutrements of the First Temple, which was built some 400 years after the Israelites entered the Promised Land. In any case, the final redactors of the Torah text that we have today skillfully blended different story traditions into a single narrative that everyone can share.

One more question: Why were both the *Ohel Mo-eid* and the *Mishkan* needed? Nahum Sarna addresses this question in his JPS Torah Commentary.⁴ He says that the function of the *Mishkan* was to create a portable

³ *Etz Hayim: Torah & Commentary*, by David L. Lieber, Jules Harlow, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, The Rabbinical Assembly, Jewish Publication Society, 2003.

⁴ *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, By Nahum M. Sarna, Jewish Publication Society, January 1991.

Sinai, by means of which a continued avenue of communication with God could be maintained. As the Israelites moved further away from Sinai, they needed a visible, tangible symbol of God's ever-abiding Presence in their midst.

Our challenge is to recognize God's constant presence in *our* lives without letting that presence become so mundane that we take it for granted.

Chazak, chazak, v'nit'chazeik. Be strong! Be strong! And may we be strengthened.