

Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei
Giving Hearts and Willing Spirits
Arielle Krule - Class of 2025

The lunar-solar calendar cycle we live by gifts us weeks in which we get to explore a double Torah portion—when two interconnected *parshiot* are combined into one Torah reading. Vayakhel-Pekudei stands out in its combination in the way that it highlights the tension we face in our everyday lives. Vayakhel translates as "and they will assemble" or "they will gather," while the word Pekudei connotes itemization and individuality. Placed one after the other, these two *parshiot* express the conflict of these two aspects of human nature: our innate need to connect with others and form a communal bond, and our need to express an individual identity.

Moses assembles the people of Israel and reiterates the opportunities of Shabbat. In his instructions to *bnei yisrael* for the construction of the Mishkan, Moshe uplifts both the individual and communal contributions as they exist in conflict and symbiosis. In Exodus 35:21-22, we read:

<p>And everyone who excelled in ability and everyone whose spirit was moved came, bringing to יהוה an offering for the work of the Tent of Meeting and for all its service and for the sacral vestments.</p>	<p>וַיָּבֹאוּ כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-נִשְׁאַן לְבּוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר נָדְבָה רוּחוֹ אֹתוֹ הֵבִיאוּ אֶת-תְּרוּמַת יְהוָה לְמַלְאכַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְלִכְל-עֲבֹדָתוֹ וְלַבְגְּדֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ:</p>
<p>Men and women, all whose hearts moved them, all who would make an elevation offering of gold to יהוה, came bringing brooches, earrings, rings, and pendants —gold objects of all kinds.</p>	<p>וַיָּבֹאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים עַל-הַנָּשִׁים כָּל נְדִיב לֵב הֵבִיאוּ חָח וְזָמָּ וְטַבַּעַת וְכוּמָז כָּל-כְּלֵי זָהָב וְכָל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֵגִיף תְּנוּפֶת זָהָב לַיהוָה:</p>

Both spirits and hearts moved. Each person brings their own unique gifts and talents to the project, and according to their own will. In the lines that ensue, we read beautiful imagery of women’s skilled hands spinning artistry with hues of blue, purple, and crimson on the finest of linen. And, this is all done as a “freewill offering” - נְדָבָה for Hashem.

This manifestation of the Divine only emerges as a result of people being able to bring their own unique gifts to the collective in the times and places that they are able to give from generously and joyfully. In doing so, they are able to see each other’s offerings and truly collaborate with enthusiasm. For the Mishkan to be built, the artisans actually needed these gifts.

I dream of living in a society like this. And while we may find pockets of this vibrant community in our own locales and neighborhoods, more generally, our society struggles with the pains of isolation. Living in a world of increased social distance and distraction that rarely allows for this type of collaboration, let alone co-existence, prevents us from living into the vision set forth by the story in our *parshiot*. We are distanced from our true essence.

Though we live in a particular moment in time, our Rabbis were not immune to this very human experience of being distanced from our inherent need to connect and contribute. In a discussion about experiences of holy days in Tractate Moed Katan 6b, they zoom into a particular experience of intervening in community.

They ask:

<p>How does one destroy ant holes? Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: One brings soil from this ant hole and places it in that ant hole, and since the ants from the two nests are not familiar with each other, they strangle each other.</p>	<p>כיצד מחריבין? רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר: מביא עפר מחור זה ונותן לתוך חור זה, והן חונקין זה את זה.</p>
<p>Rav Yeimar bar Shelamya said in the name of Abaye: And this advice works only in certain circumstances: When the ant holes are located on two opposite sides of a river, when there is no bridge connecting the two sides, when there is not even a plank bridge over the water, and when there is not even a rope stretched taut across the river. If there is any connection whatsoever between the two sides of the river, the ants from the two nests are likely to recognize each other and not fight.</p>	<p>אמר רב יימר בר שלמיא משמיה דאבאי: והוא דקאי בתרי עברי נהרא, והוא דליכא גשרא, והוא דליכא גמלא, והוא דליכא מצרא.</p>

The Sages, with more limited scientific knowledge than we have, knew that the secret to making related creatures believe they are enemies is to create discord and a sense of “foreignness” in their environment; to help them forget that their existence relies on one another’s unique contributions. It is not so hard, one might argue, to feel threatened by the individuality of our colleagues or kin, rather than see the potential for collaboration.

Part of the magic of reading the same Torah portions every year is a constant reminder that in moments when we are in the deep trenches of everyday life, we are not the first Jews to experience these lived experiences. We are the expanded stories of the arc of history and the manifested realities of our ancestors who built the Mishkan, who had to grapple in their time with how to work as a unit in the service of Hashem. So, in moments when we may feel like we are the only ones going through a particular experience—the only one, perhaps, who feels an acute sense of loss when a colleague gets a promotion instead of us, when we struggle with how to address our own loneliness amidst a crowd, or the feeling of needing to be in competition at the expense of our own wellness—we have an inherited wisdom and tradition of others grappling with the same. The balance of individuation versus community is one of the most crucial of our lives.



So, where does this leave us? The writer, activist, and thought leader Adrienne Maree Brown offers a particular *kavanah* (intention) for how we might respond to just this delicate balance.

In moments of tension between the individual and the community, Brown invites us to reflect:

Do you already know that your existence--who and how you are--is in and of itself a contribution to the people and place around you? Not after or because you do some particular thing, but simply the miracle of your life. And that the people around you, and the place(s), have contributions as well? Do you understand that your quality of life and your survival are tied to how authentic and generous the connections are between you and the people and place you live with and in?

Are you actively practicing generosity and vulnerability in order to make the connections between you and others clear, open, available, durable? Generosity here means giving of what you have without strings or expectations attached. Vulnerability means showing your needs.

(Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds)

May we benefit from seeing the opportunities of collaboration in the face of competition, and of honoring each other's contributions in the world like the Jewish people saw in the building of the Mishkan; the opportunity to bring our unique talents and inherent worth to the human collective in service of the Divine. May we be seen as we are and given the space to give generously - our own נְדָבָה.



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