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Parshat Pekudei: Inviting God into God's House

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After several weeks of Tabernacle-related readings, *parshat Pekudei* details the final completion of its construction and the inauguration of its use. "Thus was completed all the work of the Tabernacle of the Tent of Meeting. The Israelites did so; just as the Lord had commanded Moses, so they did," we are told (Ex. 39:32). Every design detail was carried out in strict accordance with God's will. Every vessel, vestment, and ornament was crafted to perfection. The time has come to put it all together in preparation for use.

Just before all items are moved into place and the Tabernacle becomes fully functional, the text pauses. Moshe, the contractor on this building project, needs a moment to take in the great feat that has been accomplished and to revel in it.

And when Moses saw that they had performed all the tasks--as the Lord had commanded, so they had done--Moses blessed them. (Ex. 39:43)

וַיִּרְא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-כָּל-הַמְּלָאכָה וְהִנֵּה עָשׂוּ אֹתָהּ
כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה כִּן עָשׂוּ וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה:
(שמות לט:מג)

There chapter 39 ends. Moshe beholds, in awe, what his people--a nation of sinners-turned-devotional worshippers--has done and he utters a blessing. Like God after the creation of the world, who also looks upon the grandeur of His handiwork and responds with blessing (Gen. 1-2), Moshe looks upon the handiwork of his people and blesses. What he says, though, is surprisingly and anti-climactically not recorded.

Rashi fills in this gap with the help of a *midrash*:

Moses blessed them: He said to them, May it be your will that the *Shekhinah* should rest in the work of your hands. "And may the pleasantness of the Lord our God be upon us..." (Ps. 90:17), and this is one of the eleven psalms in "A prayer of Moses" (Ps. 90:1). (Rashi on Exodus 39:43)

וַיְבָרֶךְ אוֹתָם מֹשֶׁה. אָמַר לָהֶם, יְהִי רָצוֹן
שֶׁתְּשָׁרָה שְׂכִינָה בְּמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵיכֶם, "וְיִהְיֶה נֹעֵם ה'
אֱלֹהֵינוּ עֲלֵינוּ וְגוֹמַר" (תהלים צ:ז), וְהוּא אָחָד
מִ"א מְזֻמָּרִים שֶׁב־תַּפְּלָה לְמֹשֶׁה" (תהלים
צ:א). (רש"י על שמות לט:מג)

Moshe's blessing to the people, it seems, is that all the labor that they have invested should in fact come to serve its end. May it be God's will that the space that He ordered as a container for divine presence indeed become one. This would be the fulfillment of God's initial charge: "וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם" "Make me a sanctuary, so that I might dwell among you" (Exodus 25:8).

Yet, as the *Ktav Sofer*, Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer (1815–1871), points out, such an interpretation fails to ascribe any uniqueness or added value to Moshe's words, rendering them a mere repetition of God's opening guarantee regarding the Tabernacle. It also fails to make much of the subtlety of their language. The phrase "may it be that..." ("*yehi ratzon*") usually has God as its subject, as in "may it be Your will, God..." But in the *midrashic* rendition, whose will is to be blessed remains subject-less and thus highly ambiguous. What, then, could Moshe's message be?

The *Ktav Sofer* states the following:

It seems fitting to say that the intention here of "may it be your will" ("yehi ratzon") refers to the will of Israel [and not God], that Israel should want and thirst for the dwelling of the *Shekhinah*. After all the works of the Tabernacle were done "as the Lord commanded," there was concern for distasteful thoughts, of pride and arrogance, of ecstasy. This moment called for concentration of the mind toward one end, without distraction, toward the dwelling of the *Shekhinah*. After all, this was the promise: "Make me a sanctuary"--for me, for my name--"and I will dwell among you." [Moshe's blessing is thus to be understood as:] "May it be your will"--the will of the Israelites themselves--"that the *Shekhinah* should rest in the work of your hands." (*Ktav Sofer* on Ex. 39:43)

נראה לומר כי הכוונה כאן, יהי רצון--רצונם של ישראל, שישראל ירצו וישתוקקו להשראת השכינה. אחרי שמלאכת המשכן נעשתה "כאשר צוה ה'" היה חשש של מחשבת פיגול, של התפארות והתנשאות, של זחירות הדעת. וכאן היה צריך בהתרכזות המחשבה לתכלית מכוונת אחת, בלי כל פגם, להשראת השכינה. ואמנם כך היתה ההבטחה: ועשו לי מקדש--לי לשמי--ושכנתי בתוכם. וזה: יהי רצון--הרצון שלכם--שתשרה השכינה במעשה ידיכם. (כתב סופר על שמות לט:מג)

The building of the Tabernacle was an enormous project that demanded a tremendous amount of effort and resources from the Jewish people. All of them donated goods; many of them donated skills and time. The details of the directives were extensive and the stakes were high. They all watched as this glorious collaborative effort took shape, perhaps taking pride in their contributions to it; perhaps amazed by the sheer glory of the edifice under construction; perhaps overwhelmed by their sense of duty to the Architect-in-Chief. Lost in the details or awed by the majesty before them, there was much in the process that might have taken *bnei yisrael* away from its core aim: to create space for God to dwell amongst them. So Moshe subtly, but ever so effectively, draws his people back to the essence of their mission just before it is to be fully realized. He calls them back to attention; beckons them to keep God close at hand. For Moshe understood a great irony--that sometimes we can lose God when trying so hard to come close to God.

As *Pekudei* unfolds and the Tabernacle, the site of so much devotion and ritual, opens for business, we are all cautioned to take note of this paradoxical reality. Even when following God to the letter of the law ("just as the Lord commanded")--or, perhaps, *precisely* when following God to the letter of the law--there is a great danger that we just might lose contact with God in the details, in the distractions, in the process. Moshe's blessing thus resonates through time. "*Yehi ratzon she'tishre Shekhinah b'maaseh yadei[nu]*." "May it be [our] will that the divine Presence rest in the work of [our] hands." May we all be blessed not to lose God in our pursuits of God.



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