

Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei Unpacking the Tabernacle to its Core Values Briah Cahana - Class of 2023

Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei continues on from Parshat Ki Tissa as if the sin of the golden calf had never happened. Back in Ki Tissa, in Exodus 31, we are told of the mishkan's artisan Bezalel, the instruments he is to construct, and the command to keep Shabbat. Five chapters later, skipping the fallout from the golden calf and its semi-reconciliation, Vayakhel opens with the same command to keep Shabbat, Bnei Yisrael's raw-material gifts that will be used to make the instruments of the Mishkan and Bezalel as the man imbued with *Ruach Elokim*, Godly spirit, managing the whole project. How do the descriptions of the mishkan carry on as if unaffected by the drama of Moshe breaking the lukhot and Hashem almost destroying Bnei Yisrael? Depending on how we read these sequences of chapters and understand the objective of the Divine Revelation at Har Sinai, we come to radically different conclusions about what is transpiring in these parshiyot.

Rashi and Ramban argue for opposite readings of the texts.¹ First, Rashi invokes the principle *אין מקדים ומאחר בתורה*, 'the Torah is not chronological' in his commentary on Exodus 31:18. He explains that although the command to build the mishkan appears prior to the sin of the golden calf in the Torah, chronologically it occurred after the building of the calf. For him, the purpose of Bnei Yisrael arriving at Har Sinai is to receive the lukhot/Torah and mitzvot (Rashi Exodus 3:12), whereas the command to build the mishkan is only in response to the sin of the golden calf. Ramban, on the other hand, primarily reads the Torah as it presents itself chronologically. He argues that the ultimate goal of Bnei Yisrael is to worship Hashem (Ramban Exodus 3:12)² as a sanctified nation precisely through building a Temple where God's presence dwells (Ramban Exodus 25).³ Law alone is not sufficient for the Ramban. Bnei Yisrael must strive to lead a holy life in close connection to God and so of course they need a tabernacle.

Either framework is compelling, but leads to different understanding of what lies at the center of our tradition: for Rashi it's worship of Hashem through mitzvot and for Ramban it's through the mishkan. In fact, we can glean insights into both Ramban and Rashi's perspectives by analyzing the sacred vessel around which the entire mishkan is built, the *ארון העדות*, the Ark of Testimony.

The Torah recounts its construction (Exodus 37:1-2):

Bezalel made the Ark of acacia wood...

He covered it with pure gold within and without,
and he made for it a gold molding all around.

וַיַּעַשׂ בְּצִלְאֵל אֶת־הָאָרֶן עֲצֵי שִׁטִּים...
וַיִּצְפֹּהוּ זָהָב טָהוֹר מִבֵּית וּמִחוּץ וַיַּעַשׂ לוֹ זָר
זָה טָבִיב:

A few questions arise from this peculiar arrangement of materials. Why not build the altar out of a solid piece of gold? Or, if the acacia wood is important, why is it necessary to cover both sides in gold? Shemot Rabba 32:4 associates the Ark with Torah as Torah and wood are often

¹ With appreciation for Rabbi Silber sharing these insights and points of comparison between Rashi and Ramban.

² כל העם בעבדם אותי בהר הזה

³ והנה הם קדושים ראויים שיהיה בהם מקדש להשרות שכינתו ביניהם

compared.⁴ So the question of the purpose of the gold still stands. My suggestion is that the Ark's inlaying of materials of gold, wood, gold, parallels the narrative structure in the parshiyot of the mishkan, the sin of the golden calf/receiving the second lukhot, and then continuing with the mishkan. Gold's pure, durable, non-corroding characteristics makes it an obvious substance to determine standard value, whereas wood, as an organic material shares human characteristics of growing and breaking down, enduring only through genetic transmission. Juxtaposing these two stories and materials validates both Ramban and Rashi's views as to what is central to Jewish tradition: both the mission to build the mishkan and to receive and practice the mitzvot. The Ark symbolically represents the meeting of the infallible Eternal and the fallible human striving toward each other, and both are sanctified. Further, within the Ark are the broken lukhot together with the whole ones, representing human attempts toward the holy and Hashem's conciliatory approach toward our limitations.

This brings us to the naming of the Ark, as the ארון העדות, the Ark of Testimony. The Ark is a testimony for two truths that at first seem at odds 1) God is Eternal and infallible and is therefore beyond the material and 2) Humans, who are part of the changing material world, can elevate it such that God's Eternal presence has a place to dwell. How exactly do the two positions cohere? Rather than falsely imagining that God dwells within the material, with the Ark at the center of the whole mishkan we understand that God's presence rests in the testimony, in the relationship and in the transmission of our people's history of striving, failing and striving again toward kedusha. We are bolstered by the knowledge that Hashem, the Eternal One, dwells with us through the generational transmission of the gift of Torah and mitzvot as well as through the present command to be a Holy nation, however that reveals itself to us.

So, what is the testimony we should be attuning ourselves to today to strive toward kedusha? In this pandemic world we're living in (and BH may the plague end soon), we bear witness to the global 2.6 million reported needless deaths over this year, including ways we've failed systemically to protect and raise the voices of the elderly, disabled, care workers and vulnerable populations, *lekhatkhila*. As much as we have striven toward kedusha, we carry these heavy broken lukhot in our Ark of Testimony, as well as the knowledge that the full lukhot represent the need for a radical change in consciousness and orientation toward the vulnerable in our midst. Let us bear witness to our humanness as well as our striving toward kedusha and wholeness as we enter Chodesh Nissan and our month of collective liberation.



Raised in the social, linguistic and culturally diverse Jewish communities of Gothenburg, Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal, Bria Cahana is honoured to begin a new chapter in New York at Yeshivat Maharat. Over the years, she has immersed herself in many formal, traditional and experiential Jewish learning environments such as Hadar, Kivunim, Pardes, and Urban Adamah all of which inform her understanding of the expansiveness of Jewish life and tradition and depth of its values. Bria is a passionate student of Torah teaching Tanakh informally at summer camp and coaching elementary and high school students for the Chidon Hatanach competition. She received her BA at McGill University in Philosophy, Jewish Studies and Arabic, which she puts to use through interfaith dialogue groups. She completed her MA at McGill University in the History of Bible Interpretation and wrote a thesis that focused on the story of the Hebrew Midwives, inspired by her work as a doula. In between waiting for babies to be delivered and writing her thesis, she had the opportunity to study sofrut, which is as much an outlet for her spirituality as for her creativity.

⁴ עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה, "It [the Torah] is a tree of life for whoever clings to it."