

## Dvar Torah on Pekudei, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2022, Mike Fenster

Apologies for not managing to link this to refugees or Ukraine – on the face of it this is a short, technical sedrah on finally completing the Tabernacle – that we have been reading about in the last 4 sedrot.

Pekudei carries on with an inventory of the items, the gold, silver and copper used by Bezalel and Oholiav.

Then in Chapter 39 we read about the making of the clothing, the vestments, robes, ephod, tunics all of blue, purple, crimson fabric, and more gold. 7 times in chapter 39 the text says “as the Lord had commanded Moses”, referencing back to Exodus 28, sedrah of Tezaveh. Why is it so important to this author that they only made these items as God had commanded Moses? When the Torah describes the construction of the structural parts of the Mishkan, the sockets, the poles, the altar, we don’t have this repeated phrase Ka’asher tzivah Adonai et Moshe. Its interesting it doesn’t say “As Moses commanded them”, the instructions they heard from Moses, but it says “as the Lord had commanded Moses”, the master plan which they only heard indirectly from Moses. It also raises a question for the more critical readers of Shemot – did they actually make the clothes, the vestments, the articles of the Mishkan ‘Exactly’ as Moses was instructed, or at least ‘exactly’ as the Torah records those instructions? More on that soon.

Finally, everything is completed, and Chapter 39 verse 32 starts by stating that: “all the work of the Mishkan was finished.” And the verse continues: “The Children of Israel did - according to all that the Lord commanded Moses, so did they do”.

Nehama Leibowitz comments on two oddities about the verse – One is that the verse is actually backwards – we’d expect the text to say that the Children of Israel did everything that God asked Moses to do, and thereby the work of making the Mishkan was finished. Secondly the repetition of the verb to do. “The Children of Israel **did** according to all that the Lord commanded Moses, so they **did**”.

She was not the first to note this, and various commentators try to unpick what the verse is really telling us. Partly it's about what did the Children of Israel actually do when the text says only Bezalel and Oholiav were the craftsmen. Some of the commentators say that what they did was just to donate the various items of metal, the bronze mirrors, and to spin the fabrics used for the curtains, and the clothes for the priests, and that it is this act of donating what was needed that is implied here when it says all the children of Israel were involved.

The donations to the Mishkan are also discussed in Midrash, for example in Bamidbar Rabbah. This midrash contrasts the fulsome donations of the ordinary Israelites with the limited donations of the princes. It says the princes thought the ordinary people would not want to part with their valuables, so the princes held back, hoping to step in and receive praise by making up with their own large donations what the ordinary people would not give. But their plan failed, as the people brought so much the craftsmen said stop, we have too much. And chapter 35 relates how the princes only brought the few remaining items needed - stones for the Ephod and breastplate. The Midrash then moves on to Bamidbar Chapter 7; although this is two books away, Chapter 7 is actually describing the same chronological day of the consecration of the mishkan as in Pekudei, the first day of the first month of the second year. The Midrash says the princes were so embarrassed by being so late in their donations for the Mishkan, that they stepped in quickly to offer the animals for the consecration ceremony.

So that's one point of view, that the work was in the donations.

Others think that the Israelites shared much more in the actual craftwork than the text which implies the work was only done by Bezalel and Oholiav.

Rashi suggests that verse 32 should be broken into 3 parts and adds the missing word to make sense of it.

Thus was completed all the work of the Mishkan Ohel Moed.  
And the children of Israel did **the work**;  
According to all that the Lord had commanded, so they did.

In this reading – it's the children of Israel, not just Bezalel and Oholiav who did the work.

But their work is now linked via the phrase 'so they did' – to the earlier repetitions of Ka'asher tzivah Adonai et Moshe.

Benno Jacob, a 20<sup>th</sup> century German orthodox rabbi, analysed the instructions given to Moses, and the details of the constructions and pointed out actually how many differences there were. He couldn't understand the differences as being due to different sources for the biblical text, and so he understood the phrase 'Ka'asher tzivah Adonai et Moshe' as implying that the craftsmen used their experience and insight to interpret what Moses told them, to achieve a final result as close as possible to what Gods intentions were. Just as we struggle with those IKEA leaflets, but if we have an idea of what the finished article should look like, we can interpret them – So Jacob is saying the craftsmen didn't just blindly follow the instructions from Moses; they had to actively work out how to make the items to meet Gods objective. That's a valuable lesson – never underestimate your own contribution to an activity – your insight and understanding will improve the final result.

Finally, in 39:33 all of the completed articles are brought to Moses, who assembles the Mishkan, makes ready all of the items needed to start the consecration services to start on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year. Once again, the phrase Ka'asher tzivah Adonai et Moshe is repeated 7 times. The final job is to erect an enclosure and a gate all around the Tent of meeting.

And then what happened? A cloud conceals the Mishkan from the people and then God's glory enters the Mishkan. Moses couldn't enter the Mishkan then. The cloud only lifts when the children of Israel set out on their journeys, at which times the levites dismantle the Mishkan ohel moed and carry it to the next destination.

So we have this mysterious tent, shrouded in cloud except when it moves. Moses couldn't enter it when it was stationary. It was in view of all the Israelites, throughout their journeys, as the last verse

says, but it was really never in view – it was either in cloud, or dismantled and moving.

What could be seen? Not much.

One can imagine how frustrating it would have seemed that after all of the effort to work and mould the gold silver and copper into these beautiful objects, they were now essentially hidden from the people who had given their valuables to be melted down for sockets, candlesticks, the altar. Not only were the Israelites not able to see everything inside the Ohel Moed, because only the Leviim and Kohanim had access, but they were also hidden not just by an enclosure and gates around the Ohel Moed, but also hidden in cloud.

But there is another very different Ohel Moed which is discussed earlier, in Ki Tissa. Ex 33, v7 – “Now Moses would take the tent (Et Ha’ohel) and pitch it outside the camp, at some distance from the camp. It was called the tent of meeting – the Ohel moed.

This is the subject of a rare joke about the book of Exodus.

Moses walks into a psychiatrist's office. He says, “Doctor, last night I dreamed I was the Ohel Moed.” He comes in the next day and says, “Doctor, last night, I dreamed I was the Mishkan.” The doctor says, “Moses, the problem is you're two tents.”

This joke was supposedly told by Richard Elliot Friedman, at a conference. Friedman wrote several books on the theme of ‘Who wrote the Bible’.

Moses’ Ohel Moed is quite different from the mishkan ohel moed described in Pekudei. It says in Ki Tissa – “whoever sought the Lord would go out to the Tent of meeting, that was outside the camp”, implying that this was not an ohel moed limited to priests and Leviim, but was for all of the people. There was a pillar of cloud, but this cloud just stood at the entrance of Moses’ Ohel moed, it didn’t cover it.

So Friedman sees Moses' Ohel moed with its pillar of cloud as one tradition, the non-priestly tradition, while the Mishkan ohel moed enveloped in cloud in today's sedrah of Pekudei is the priestly tradition of a tent in the desert. Two tents. But also two concepts of how the people access God in their midst. Perhaps these two opposing concepts still exist in how we look at our synagogues and our communities.

Is it a relationship mediated by sacred objects hidden behind a barrier of clouds and enclosures in the heart of the camp, or a space outside the camp where anyone who seeks God is able to go?

In a Torah probably edited by the priests, we find 25% of Shemot is dedicated to describing this tent, whereas the non-priestly tradition of a place outside the camp to commune with God gets only a few verses in chapter 33. But now, the temple, and the Mishkan, with its sacrifices, gold and silver, and barriers to participation seem an anachronistic mode of worship - whereas the idea of a tent which can be anywhere, even outside the camp, and where anyone goes to, who seeks God - that has become the model of our synagogue.

But it's not an either / or. Some aspects of the Mishkan ohel moed are valuable and worth taking forward. The idea that everyone contributed, that "all whose hearts moved them" came forward, and made a contribution in whatever way they could, and together contributed more than the princes of Israel, is a powerful image of how we should respond to today's needs.