

TIMELESS TORAH

VAYAKHEL-PEKUDEI : STANDING OUT WHILE STANDING TOGETHER

The Three Unifiers

Living within a community creates an inherent paradox. On the one hand, contribution to the improvement of society involves focusing on the general good and (frequently) conforming to certain public expectations. On the other hand, individuals within the community live with a natural instinct to stand out and develop their own unique skills. In a sense, the double parashah of Vaykhel-Pekudei underscores this dichotomy. Vayakhel opens with the gathering together of the nation to construct the Mishkan, whereas much of Pekudei focuses on the specific tasks undertaken by certain individuals.

The very first passage of Vayakhel accentuates the message of unity. On a literal level, these verses (35:1-3) relate to how Moshe gathered the nation together to instruct them about the building of the Mishkan. But in a figurative sense, the lesson here runs far deeper. Rashi informs us that this gathering occurred on the day that Moshe descended from the Mountain for the third time, immediately following Yom Kippur. This gathering, as the Midrash expresses it, was intended to rectify the negative gathering of the people to make the Golden Calf. As explained by the Kli Yakar (Prague, d.1619), just as Yom Kippur unites the people as a whole, so would the building of the Mishkan serve as a communal project allowing the Divine Presence to once again rest among the people.

In this way, the constant juxtaposition of Shabbat to the Mishkan becomes relevant to the very concept of the Mishkan. Shabbat, like Yom Kippur, brings the nation together with each other as well as closer to Hashem. On Shabbat, all work ceases and all strata of the nation, rich and poor alike, even serants, must rest. In a lecture given in 1972,

Rav Soloveitchik (d.1993), recalls growing up in a small Chassidic *shtetl* in Russia. Every Friday evening, the local Jews, impoverished and simple labourers, would convene there, as he puts it, with their beards and *peyot* still glistening with the water from their pre-Shabbat *mikveh* immersions. Forgetting for the moment their pitiful state, they would sing together Tehillim 107, praising Hashem for the deliverance of the Jewish nation from oppression. Thus, the Mishkan, Yom Kippur and Shabbat come together here as the three great unifiers of Jewish society.

Teaching Inspiration

On the other hand, the subsequent verses (35:21-29) seem to emphasise the opposite perspective. In this passage, which describes the attitude of the people as they contributed to the Mishkan, two expressions stand out: '*asher **nadav rucho*** – Each person of generous spirit' and '*Ish asher **nesa'o libo*** – Each person whose heart elevated them'. The latter expression, explains the Ramban, refers to a person who was not necessarily a generous giver, but who was motivated to become a doer. This was not a result of specific training in the various intricate skills required to construct the Mishkan, but someone inspired to discover their own hidden talents and develop them. Here, the spotlight is on allowing one's individuality to shine, with a particular emphasis on doing so in the context of communal work.

A fascinating insight in Rashi takes this idea further. In verses 30-36, Moshe tells the Jewish people that the manager of the enterprise will be a nobleman from the tribe of Yehudah called Betzalel. Hashem will 'fill him with understanding and proficiency', and he will become familiar with all the various skills needed and instruct the rest of



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

Wednesdays - 8.00-8.45pm | In-person at Kinloss

the people accordingly. Additionally, in this role, Betzalel will have an assistant called Oholiav, from the tribe of Dan. Rashi points out that this partnership was unusual, as Yehudah was the most aristocratic of the tribes while Dan was considered the lowest in terms of their social standing. The message here, says Rashi, is that there must be no class differentiation when building the Mishkan. The honour bestowed upon Betzalel was not connected to him as an individual or to his family but solely to his role in the project.

An interesting question, however, is why Rashi does not make this comment in Parashat Ki Tissa, where Betzalel and Oholiav are first mentioned. Possibly, Rashi waited for Parashat Vayakhel because it is only in this Parashah that the verses stress that Betzalel, together with Oholiav, would need to instruct others. The humility that Betzalel had to learn was perhaps driven home only after he began to teach others. The true test of a person's ability to give of themselves to the community is not how generous they are in public service, but how they are able to encourage and train others to emulate their skills. Identifying one's talents, developing them, and then inspiring others to do the same is the epitome of standing out while standing together.

Finding Harmony Together

The organisation of every society contains five distinct roles: those who formulate the ideology, the instructors, the constructors who put together the essential building blocks of the society, the maintainers who ensure that everything runs as it is meant to, and finally, the workers, who are those who apply their skills on an ongoing basis. According to the Ohr HaChaim (d.1743), all these five elements are hinted at in the first two verses of Parashat Pekudei, which

enumerates the five levels of appointments in building the Mishkan. The Torah, the 'eidut', was the blueprint for the whole project. Moshe served as the instructor, the Levites had to set up the Mishkan wherever they went, the Kohanim actually ran the service and Betzalel, personified the application of skills. Throughout the parashah, it is repeated constantly that the Mishkan was built by all Klal Yisrael. Just as no society can function without any one of these roles, so did this project require the participation and coordination of all levels of the Jewish people.

In this context, the Kli Yakar explains two consecutive verses that seem to repeat exactly the same statement. Verse 39:42 states that the Jewish people 'performed the entire service (avodah)', while the next verse repeats that 'Moshe saw all the work (melachah) and they had done it'. Despite the similarity of these verses, the difference in their wording is significant. The first verse refers to the specific 'services' that were performed in order to create the various elements of the Mishkan and ensure they all worked together as one. The second verse, though, talks about 'work' in an abstract sense. Moshe saw how each person's individual contribution combined harmoniously to form the 'work' of the Mishkan – an achievement on a par with the very Creation of the world, which is also described as melacha (see Bereshit 2:2).

The building of the Mishkan was the blueprint for an optimal Jewish society. We live together as a community, and it is the lessons of these parshiyot that teach us how to balance and harmonise our own personal growth with our communal commitments.

**Next Week - VAYIKRA: THE CALL THAT
CHANGES EVERYTHING**