

TIMELESS TORAH

PARSHAT VAYAKHEL - The Power of a Covenantal Community

Gathering and Growing

Chronologically, this parshah, which deals with the construction of the Mishkan, comes in direct succession to the episode of the Golden Calf. We will discover that this sequence is critical to understanding the messages and meaning contained within it.

Rashi begins the parshah with two comments on the word '*vayakhel* — and he gathered'. Firstly, Rashi explains, this event happened on the day after Yom Kippur, immediately after Moshe descended from the mountain having achieved forgiveness for the Jewish people. Secondly, he continues, this word is from the grammatical stem *hiphil* (causative) and means that Moshe, rather than forcibly gathering the people together, said or did something that caused the people to gather of their own accord. In this way, this 'gathering' is a direct manifestation of the lesson learned from last week's parshah, in which Moshe distanced himself from the people and encouraged them to be proactive in their spirituality. At that point, after the Golden Calf, Moshe taught the people that just as he was a human being who had grown to great heights, every individual could also utilise their potential to grow by themselves without having to resort to intermediaries between them and the Divine. Here, we find that the lesson was accepted and the people gathered of their own accord, following Moshe's inspirational example.

The very last verses of last week's parshah, however, seem to be an anomaly in light of this interpretation.

The verses describe the radiant beams of light that emanated from Moshe's face after he descended from the mountain, which were so overwhelming that the people were afraid to draw near to him. What was the point of these beams of light? Surely, this would lead to the same pitfall that led to the sin of the Golden Calf, for if the people thought that Moshe was godlike, they would not strive to grow but would seek passive avenues to bring spirituality towards them. The Ohr Hachaim (d. 1743) contends that in fact the opposite was true. Specifically after having internalised the lessons of the Golden Calf, the people noticed Moshe's extraordinary stature and they felt inadequate in his presence. Observing how Moshe had realised the vast potential latent within every human being, they saw their own shortcomings and wondered how they could reach his level. For this reason, Moshe 'gathered **all** of the congregation', even those who might have become dispirited upon witnessing the rays of light, teaching them that their feelings of inadequacy could be a precursor to true growth. To illustrate the power of this message, the late Rabbi Dr Abraham J Twerski (d. 2021) highlighted in a famous short video clip the fact that a lobster is a small soft animal that lives inside a hard shell. As it grows, it begins to feel uncomfortable in its shell, as it is now too small to accommodate it. At that point, it seeks to change it for a larger one. Thus, it is the feeling of discomfort experienced by the lobster that is the prompt for it to grow. We, too, can take this analogy and realise that when we feel uncomfortable with our current status, this can be an impetus for us to grow spiritually.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

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Building on Unity

According to the Ramban, the gathering of Vayakhel was a direct instruction as to how to move forward following previous mistakes. Although Moshe had been commanded about the Mishkan before the sin of the Golden Calf, through telling the people about it at this juncture, he sought to convey to them that they had returned to their former spiritual level. In Parshat Terumah, the people had been informed that they would merit to have Hashem's *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) among them. Now, even after the devastating sin of the Golden Calf, they were told that they had been forgiven and they would still have that opportunity. But forgiven does not mean forgotten. Inside the Aron, in the most critical part of the Mishkan, lay not only the new Luchot (Tablets) but the broken shards of the old *Luchot*, as a reminder that one cannot necessarily turn the clock back and remove unfortunate events that have transpired, but one can always move forward and build on previous mistakes. This is the message of *vayakhel* — not everything that is broken can be healed but it can be brought together in realisation of a meaningful new aim.

Sacred Space, Sacred Time

Indeed, the concept of congregational service itself is a reflection of individual inadequacies. No single person can ever be complete in his or her service, but together, the congregation provides a symphony of perfection. In this vein, the Midrash tells us that the gathering of the Jewish people to build the Mishkan was more than just a

momentary meeting. Rather, Hashem was telling Moshe and his successors to build, throughout the generations, *shuls* and *batei medrash* to teach congregations about Hashem and his mitzvot. With these words of Torah, the people would be inspired to become representatives of Hashem and witnesses of His dominion. These ongoing national gatherings constitute the construction of *sacred spaces*, which are not only physical areas in which to pray, but are places in which entire congregations can unite and live out together the ideals that these spaces represent.

If the gathering to build a Mishkan gives us the idea of sacred space, a second theme running through these opening verses of the parshah is that of sacred time. Even before the Mishkan is mentioned in this parshah, the verses tell of the holiness of Shabbat. Our Sages explain that this is to tell us that the construction of the Mishkan may not take place on Shabbat; the holiness of Shabbat takes precedence over the importance of building the Mishkan. The idea here is that sometimes, when a community is involved in a project, there is a risk that they may forget the ultimate goal. But during the building of the Mishkan, however exhilarating the prospect of a national unifying project, its spiritual core was demonstrated every week when the construction stopped for Shabbat. This is a critical lesson for our own efforts in community building. We must always remind ourselves of the ultimate spiritual objectives that lie at the heart of the reason for the existence of our congregational spaces.

Next Week: Pekudei - Completion & Realisation: The Last Stage of Exodus