

LESSONS FROM THE KERUVIM

by Shlomo Katz

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Vayakhel-Pekudei

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Today's Learning:

Shevuot 3:10-11

Orach Chaim 600:3-601:1

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Bava Metzia 107

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Terumot 44

In the two parashot read this week, Vayakhel and Pekudei, we read that the Mishkan and each of its vessels was constructed in accordance with Hashem's command. The nineteenth century Torah commentator R' Meir Leibush Malbim z"l devoted a special booklet to explaining the lessons we can learn from each of the details of the Mishkan's design and construction. For example, he writes about the keruvim / cherubs:

The keruvim teach how Jewish leaders should behave. We have two kinds of leaders: political and religious. There were two keruvim, each of which stood over one side of the Ark. Inside the Ark were the two luchot, one of which listed mitzvot bein adam la'Makom / between man and G-d (i.e., the first five commandments), and the other, mitzvot bein adam la'chaveiro / between man and man (i.e., the second five commandments). The keruvim spread their wings over the Ark, and our leaders likewise are responsible for safeguarding the Torah. Specifically, our religious leaders are

responsible for ensuring the performance of mitzvot bein adam la'Makom, while our political leaders are responsible for ensuring the performance of mitzvot bein adam la'chaveiro. Both keruvim, however, were attached to the Ark and their faces looked downward towards the Ark. Both sets of leaders, religious and political, must be guided by the Torah. Also, both keruvim pointed their wings toward the heavens, for both sets of leaders must act only for the sake of Heaven. Indeed, our leaders, like the keruvim, must raise themselves above any material or other personal concerns. And, the keruvim faced each other, for political and religious leaders must respect and work with each other. (Rimzai Ha'mishkan: Parashat Terumah)

"Bezalel made the Ark of acacia wood, two and a half cubits its length; a cubit and a half its width; and a cubit and a half its height." (37:1)

R' David ben Amram z"l (Aden, Yemen; 14th century) writes: There were five primary objects in the Mishkan: The Ark, the Table, the Menorah, and the two altars. Each parallels a group within the Jewish people, as follows:

The Ark parallels tzaddikim, whose insides are just like their outsides. [Just as the ark was gold inside and out, so a tzaddik's inner thoughts and outward actions are completely consistent with each other.]

The Table parallels the kings [perhaps because the Table represents wealth].

The Menorah parallels Torah scholars. [The light of the Menorah alludes to the light of Torah.]

The inner altar parallels the Kohanim. [Only Kohanim were permitted to approach that altar.]

The outer altar parallels the remainder of the Jewish people. [That altar stood in the courtyard of the Mishkan and was where most private sacrifices were brought.]

R' David adds: The Ark had the Torah inside it, just as it says about a tzaddik (Tehilim 37:31), "The Torah of G-d is in his heart." The base of the Ark had a fractional area (2.5 amot long x 1.5 amot wide = 3.75 square amot), symbolizing that a tzaddik ignores part of his physical needs and devotes more to his spiritual needs. The surface area of the Ark's four walls was 12 square amot ((2.5 x 1.5) + (1.5 x 1.5) + (2.5 x 1.5) + (1.5 x 1.5)), symbolizing the twelve traits of a tzaddik, as described in Tehilim (15:1-5):

A psalm by David. Hashem, who may sojourn in Your Tent? Who may dwell on Your Holy Mountain? One who walks in perfect innocence, and does what is right, and speaks the truth from his heart; one who has no slander on his tongue, who has done his fellow no evil, nor cast disgrace upon his close one; in whose eyes a contemptible person is repulsive, but who honors those who fear Hashem; who can swear to his detriment without retracting; one who lends not his money on interest, and takes not a bribe against the innocent. The doer of these shall not falter forever.

[R' David does not indicate how he would break the above list into twelve traits. Perhaps he reads

the second introductory question as a statement: "One who dwells on Your holy mountain.]"

We noted above that the Ark parallels tzaddikim, whose insides are just like their outsides. [This trait is referred to in the above psalm as "he speaks the truth from his heart."] Why, then, asks R' David, did the Ark also have a layer of wood? Why wasn't it made of pure gold? He answers by alluding to an ancient philosophical question: Who is greater - the tzaddik who is born with a disposition to do good or the one who struggles and overcomes his yetzer hara? The design of the Ark answers this question. The gold of the Ark surrounded another material - wood - as if it had captured it. A tzaddik must have sterling qualities, but as a result of conquering and restraining his baser qualities, not as a result of being born perfect. (Midrash Hagadol: Parashat Terumah)

Thirty Days Before Pesach...

Why don't we recite a berachah on the mitzvah of sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim / retelling the story of the Exodus? R' Asher Anshel Katz z"l (Hungarian rabbi; killed in the Holocaust) quotes a work called Chessed L'Avraham which explains:

R' Yonatan Eyebchutz z"l (died 1764) asks: Why do we not recite a berachah before performing the mitzvah of giving charity? Because, R' Eyebchutz answers, the existence of this mitzvah is a curse. Were we worthy, we would see the fulfillment of the verse (Devarim 15:4), "However, may there be no destitute person among you; rather, Hashem will surely bless you." We do not recite a blessing over something which has an element of a curse to it.

Similarly, states the work Chessed L'Avraham, if we were worthy we would see the fulfillment of the verses (Yirmiyah 23:7-8), "Behold! Days are coming - the word of Hashem - when people will no longer swear, 'As Hashem lives, Who brought Bnei Yisrael up from the land of Egypt,' but rather, 'As Hashem lives, Who brought up and brought back the offspring of the House of Israel from the land of the North and from all the lands wherein He had dispersed them', and they will dwell in their own land." The miracles of the Final Redemption will be so great that they will supplant the Exodus from Egypt in our national consciousness. Since we look forward to that day, how can we recite a blessing over the mitzvah of sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim!

R' Katz adds: Perhaps this is why we declare at the very beginning of the Seder, "This year, here. Next year in Yerushalayim." One would expect the Seder to begin with a berachah, "Who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us regarding the mitzvah of sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim." Our declaration, "This year, here. Next year in Yerushalayim," is our explanation for why we do not recite such a berachah. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Chodesh Ha'aviv p. 85)

One might ask, especially in light of the above, why do we continue to recall the Exodus every year? After all, we are still in exile!

R' Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht z"l (founder and rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh) used to begin

his Seder with a parallel that addressed this question:

There were two destitute brothers who sold used rags that they found in other people's garbage. So poor were they that the only place they could find to live was a large barrel, which they shared.

One day, they earned an unusually large amount of money. It was the first time that they had ever possessed more money than they needed for one day, so they bought a lottery ticket. And, they won! They were now wealthy.

The brothers had different ideas about how to spend their money. One took his half and bought a large house and fancy cars. Since he didn't have to work, he spent his time traveling, hunting, and engaging in other leisure activities.

The other brother took his wealth and used it to obtain an education. Before long, he was expert in a number of sciences and other subjects. Soon, the two brothers had little in common, but they still met every year on the anniversary of their day of good fortune in order to recall how their lives had changed.

But life is a never-ending cycle, and one day, the two brothers became poor again. When the next anniversary of their first change of fortune arrived, the brother who had chosen a life of leisure saw no reason to celebrate; he had nothing left of his good fortune. However, his brother continued to observe that anniversary, saying that although he had no money, he still had the education that he had obtained.

So, too, said R' Goldvicht, we may be in exile, but we still have the education that we received as a result of the Exodus, namely, the Torah. Therefore, the Exodus is still something to celebrate and remember. (Asufot Ma'archot: Haggadah Shel Pesach p. 13)

R' David Sperber z"l

5637 (1877) - 25 Adar II 5722 (1962)

R' Sperber was known as the "Gaon / Sage from Brashov," after the Rumanian city where he served as rabbi beginning in 1922. His first rabbinic post was in Polen-Riskava, where he conducted his rabbinate in accordance with the dictum of Chazal: "The talmidei chachamim in the city are responsible for all its affairs." For example, in addition to the traditional functions of a rabbi, his activities included nursing cholera victims during an epidemic and organizing armed self defense bands during a pogrom.

R' Sperber was known as an expert judge regarding both public affairs and business matters. (One of his works addressed the halachot of ex parte communications with judges.) He also made then-innovative decrees for the good of the community, including that every butcher, no matter how observant, must have a full time mashgiach on the premises.

Despite his own stature, R' Sperber remained a self-effacing chassid of R' Moshe Hager of Kossov, and he was responsible for the publication of that rebbe's works. However, R' Sperber also visited other leading chassidic rebbes of Hungary and tried to learn from their ways.

In his great humility, R' Sperber used to blush whenever he heard himself referred to as a "gaon." In his writings, he bemoaned the fact that he was never able to establish a yeshiva, and possibly did not leave any worthy students (a fear which was unfounded). He told his children that he wanted to be remembered as one who shared in the suffering of other Jews and as one who tried to attain the true meaning of Torah. One of his sons related that R' Sperber restrained his quick mind in order to concentrate on a subject's main point. To do otherwise, he felt, was like eating the fruits that have fallen off a tree, but never stopping to pick the many fruits that remain.

R' Sperber was active in rescue efforts during the Holocaust. (Rumanian Jews were protected, though not well treated, by their government.) In 1950, R' Sperber settled in Israel, where he continued to be active in public affairs.

R' Sperber's son-in-law was R' Yehoshua Deutsch, rabbi of the Katamon section of Yerushalayim. One of R' Sperber's grandsons is Rabbi Dr. Daniel Sperber, author of the multi-volume Minhagei Yisrael.

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