

MOSHEH V. BETZALEL

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I THE CHRONOLOGY OF MATTAN TORAH

If we read through the second half of Sefer Sh'mot (the Book of Exodus) and accept the retelling of events as being presented in a chronologically accurate manner, we come up with the following sequence:

1. Mosheh and all of the B'nei Yisra'el stand together at the foot of Mount Sinai and hear God's first Ten Statements (20:1-14)
2. The B'nei Yisra'el ask Mosheh to approach God to hear the rest of the commandments, due to their own fear of the terrifying encounter with the Almighty (20:15-18).
3. Mosheh enters the cloud at the foot of the mountain and receives many more laws and commands (20:18-24:2)
4. God tells Mosheh to come up to the top of the mountain in order to worship and approach God. (24:1-2)
5. Mosheh leaves the cloud and relates all of the laws he has received to the B'nei Yisra'el; after their acceptance of the laws, he initiates a covenant ceremony to seal their commitment. (24:3-8)
6. Mosheh and his entourage ascend part way up the mountain to worship God. (24:9-11)
7. Mosheh ascends alone in order to receive the "Tablets of stone, the Torah and the Mitzvah which I have written in order to instruct them." After six days of waiting outside of the cloud covering Mount Sinai, Mosheh is called in on the seventh day - and stays for forty days and forty nights (it is unclear if the six days of waiting are considered part of the forty). (24:12-18)
8. God commands Mosheh regarding the **Mishkan** (Tabernacle), it's vessels, the clothes of the Kohanim and some of the worship-services to be done inside - ending with a reminder about the sanctity of Shabbat. (25:1-31:17)
9. God gives Mosheh the two tablets of stone. (31:18)
10. The people coerce Aharon into building the golden calf which they worship. (32:1-6)
11. God tells Mosheh to descend on account of this grievous sin. Mosheh prays for God's forgiveness (32:7-14)
12. Mosheh chastises (and more) the people about the sin - he ascends the mountain to gain

God's forgiveness and a reaffirmation of the covenant - including the 13 attributes of compassion. (32:15-34:35)

13. *Mosheh assembles the people in order to command them about the building of the Mishkan - which is accomplished. All of the details of the Mishkan and its vessels, as presented in Chapters 25-31 (the command), are repeated here (the performance). (35:1-40:33)*
14. *God's glory covered the Mishkan. (40:34-38)*

Following this sequence, the command to build the Mishkan and all of the associated details were not a response to the sin of the golden calf. That sin, which apparently took place towards the end of Mosheh's first forty-day visit on top of Sinai, was "brewing" while God was commanding Mosheh regarding the Mishkan, its vessels, the clothes of the Kohanim etc. The sin of the golden calf merely interrupted this process and necessitated Mosheh's intervention to save the people and restore the possibility of God's presence being manifest among them. (see 33:12-16)

There are opinions in the Midrash (notably Tanhuma - specifically Terumah #8, Ki Tissa #2, P'kudei #2, #11) which posit that either the entire institution of the Mishkan - or, at the very least, the command to donate a half-Shekel towards it (30:11-16) - should be understood as Divine reactions to the sin of the golden calf.

Following the notion that the entire Mishkan was a reaction, the Midrash builds on Mosheh's concerns that God's presence not abandon the people as a result of the sin:

"how will the nations of the world know that You have forgiven them? 'Make for Me a Mikdash and I will dwell among them' ".

The more "limited" approach which maintains that the command to donate a half-shekel was a response to the sin is expressing a sensitivity to the text of that command:

*The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less, than the half shekel, when you bring this offering to YHVH **l'khaper 'al naph'shoteikhem** (to make atonement for your lives). You shall take the atonement money from the Israelites and shall designate it for the service of the tent of meeting; before YHVH it will be a reminder to the Israelites **l'khaper 'al naph'shoteikhem**. (30:15-16)*

The Torah's assignment of the donation to the Mishkan as a **kapparat nephesh** (atonement/ransom for a life) may be understood to mean that the donation was coming to protect us from an impending punishment (see R. Menachem Liebttag's shiurim on the connection between atonement and protection as seen through the Biblical usage of the root **k-ph-r** - you can find these shiurim at [his Tanakh Study Center](#)) - ostensibly the punishment for the sin of the golden calf. (See JT Shekalim 2:3)

Rashi (commentary to 31:18) reiterates his famous approach **Ein Mukdam uM'uchar baTorah** (chronological sequence is not maintained in the Torah) and applies it to our sequence. Following the direction outlined in the above-mentioned Midrashim, Rashi explains that the entire command of the Mishkan - and specifically the command of the half-Shekel donation - was given after the sin of the golden calf and served as a method of atonement for that apostasy.

Ramban (in several places - see especially 18:1) challenges the approach on general terms and, in his commentary to 32:7, rejects its application here. (Parenthetically, one of the questions asked by Ramban against Rashi goes to purpose - what did the Torah gain by pulling these commands and narratives out of chronological sequence and reweaving them this way - see Ramban's comments here). Ramban maintains here - as he does elsewhere (except where impossible - compare Bamidbar [Numbers] 1:1 and 9:1) - that the sequence as presented in the Torah is accurate (See BT Pesachim 6b).

In our investigation of the commands regarding the Mishkan, we will follow Ramban's approach and view the presentation as chronologically sequential and accurate.

II

WHY A MISHKAN?

Following Rashi's approach, the purpose of the Mishkan is abundantly clear - it is, in one way or another, a response to the sin of the golden calf. According to Ramban, however, what purpose does it serve? Why did the B'nei Yisra'el need to have this moving Tabernacle to house God's Presence?

Ramban answers this question himself, in the introduction to his commentary on Parashat Terumah:

The Mishkan, Ramban explains, serves as a vehicle to perpetuate the Sinai experience. Once B'nei Yisra'el had experienced the great encounter with God at the mountain, it was His desire that they be able to keep this experience - albeit in a more confined manner - with them as they traveled to Eretz Yisra'el.

The Ramban's approach explains the numerous similarities between the Mishkan and **Ma'amad Har Sinai** (the encounter at Mount Sinai). Here are a few examples:

14. *Just as God had spoken to the B'nei Yisra'el at Mount Sinai, so too does He continue to speak to them (via Mosheh) from the **Kodesh haKodoshim** (Holy of Holies), through the **K'ruvim** (Cherubim) atop the **Aron** (Ark) (25:22);*
16. *The **Luchot Ha'eidut** (Tablets of Testimony) which Mosheh will receive (24:12) on Mount Sinai, serve as a testimony to the giving of the Torah and thus, will be kept in the Aron, the focal*

- point of the Mishkan (25:21);*
17. *The Cloud created by the Incense Altar (30:1-10) symbolizes the Cloud that covered Mount Sinai (19:9, 24:15-18);*
18. *The Fire on the Altar (Vayyikra [Leviticus] 6:6) symbolizes the Fire that descended on Mount Sinai (Sh'mot 24:17). The laws of the Altar reflect the Covenant ceremony that took place just before Mosheh ascended Mount Sinai (see 24:4-5).*

III

REPETITION OR INNOVATION?

Now that we understand the purpose of the Mishkan, we must deal with a severe textual problem regarding the Mishkan-commands.

As we know, every word - and, in some sense, every letter - of the Torah's text is informative. It is safe to say that not one phrase is superfluous. We learn many laws from the apparent repetition of laws, just as we learn many lessons from a varied retelling of a story.

Keeping this in mind, the Torah's presentation of the laws of the Mishkan seems odd and out-of-character. After the commands are given (Chapters 25-31), we are told - in painstaking detail - that the B'nei Yisra'el fulfilled these same commands (Chapters 35-40). Why doesn't the Torah simply say: "And the B'nei Yisra'el did just as God had commanded them" and leave it at that?

The Beit haLevi (R. Yoseph Baer Soloveitchik zt"l - R. Hayyim Brisker's father) gave the following response (in his commentary on Parashat Ki Tissa):

[Following Rashi:] The goal of the Mishkan was to atone for the sin of the golden calf. That sin was the result of the B'nei Yisra'el's misguided approach to spirituality; they thought that they could "write their own rules" to achieving an encounter with God. Therefore, as they constructed the Mishkan, each item was constructed properly - just as God commanded them - a fact which is lovingly noted by God Himself in His Torah.

IV

SIMILARITIES AND CONTRAST

As we noted earlier, we are going to try to explain the sequence of - and, ergo, the repetition in -

these chapters according to Ramban's approach. First, a brief interlude of a methodological nature.

When the Torah repeats itself - or uses common terminology in two passages - it is doing so in order to draw our attention to the similarities between the two passages in question. Once we have made the association, the Torah may utilize a contrasting term in order to demonstrate the difference between the two passages. A clear example of this is the contrast between the Avraham narrative (B'resheet [Genesis] 22) and the Bil'am story (Bamidbar 22).

Another example which draws closer to ours is the seeming repetition of the Eliezer narrative in B'resheet 24. First, we are told the story (vv. 10-33). Then, Eliezer retells the story to Rivkah's family (vv. 34-48). The Midrash comments on this seeming verbosity by stating that "the 'idle talk' of the servants of the houses of the Patriarchs is dearer before God than the Torah of their children" (B'resheet Rabbah 60:8). There are, however, some significant differences between the narrative that we are invited to hear and that which Eliezer shares with his potential "clients". For instance, in the narrative, Eliezer gives Rivkah some jewelry before finding out who she is - whereas in his retelling, this takes place after he has verified her identity and family background. This may be because Eliezer was confident that her fulfillment of the sign he requested was "enough" - but he knew that Lavan and Betuel would consider that foolish. This teaches us how to deal with dishonest people, as well as some (possible) limitations on trusting "signs". (Dr. Nehama Leibowitz z"l deals with this issue in her **Iyyunim b'Sefer B'resheet** pp. 162-166. She even explains that the "dearness" of the "idle talk" of the servants of the houses of the Patriarchs is due to the changes between the narrative and the retelling).

Following this approach, we need to note the differences between the two passages in question.

One of the most basic differences is the order of the construction. Whereas in Parashiot T'rumah-Tetzaveh, God first commanded us to build an Aron, Cover (with K'ruvim), the Table and Menorah (which all stood in the Kodesh) and then the structure of the Mishkan, the narrative in Parashiot Vayakhel-P'kudei records the construction of the Mishkan before the building of the various vessels mentioned above. How can we understand this "switch"?

V

PURPOSE AND PROCESS

The simplest way to explain it is by way of analogy. When designing an office building, the first thing taken into account is the ultimate purpose of the structure: Is it going to be a law office, needing a sizable library, conference room and reception area? Is it going to be a medical office, needing multiple cubicles for consultations?

Once the purpose is determined, the process of the building - designed around that purpose - sets

in. This process begins from the foundation up. The division into cubicles or library and conference rooms happens at the end - although the structure has been designed with that purpose in mind.

In much the same way, the commands - as presented in Parashiot T'rumah-Tetzaveh - reflect the *telos* (purpose) - of the Mishkan. The ultimate purpose is the enshrining of God's Presence, as He meets with Mosheh (and, through him, with the B'nei Yisra'el), by speaking from between the K'ruvim atop the Aron. All of the surrounding structure is the necessary circumstance within which to place the Aron and the K'ruvim.

Therefore, the commands begin much as any architectural design would - identifying the purpose of the structure and moving outwards from there. When it comes to the actual construction, however, the outside structure had to be built first, in order to have a place to house the Aron, K'ruvim, Table, Menorah etc.

This explanation would suit us fine - if it were not for a Rabbinic tradition about the discussion between Mosheh and the chief engineer of the Mishkan, Betzalel.

VI

BETZALEL'S INSIGHT

The Gemara in Berakhot (55a) records the following discussion (as a way of explaining Betzalel's name):

*R. Sh'mu'el b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: Betzalel is named for his insight. When **haKadosh Barukh Hu** [God] told Mosheh to go tell Betzalel to "make for Me a Mishkan, [then] an Aron and vessels", Mosheh went and reversed the order, saying "make an Aron, vessels and [then] a Mishkan". He said: "Mosheh our teacher, the normal way of the world is that a person first builds a house and only afterwards brings vessels into it - and you are telling me to build an Aron, vessels and [then] a Mishkan; where will I put the vessels that I build? Perhaps what haKadosh Barukh Hu told you was to make a Mishkan, [then] an Aron and vessels?" [Mosheh] replied: "Perhaps you were **B'tzel El** (in the shade of God - hence his name) and you knew".*

This Gemara is a bit difficult to understand. What exactly did Mosheh do?

There are two possible ways to understand Mosheh's behavior - before even attempting to explain it. The first way, which is a more literal read of the Gemara's account, is that Mosheh received the commands in the order of construction and reversed that order. This approach is fraught with doctrinal sensitivity, as it implies a great deal of editorial latitude on the part of Mosheh Rabbenu in the composition of the Torah. (See Rashi at BT Hullin 101b s.v. Ela).

Let's assume, for argument's sake, the more "tenable" option, although it is a bit more difficult of a read in the Gemara: Mosheh got the commands in the order that we read in Parashiot T'rumah-Tetzaveh and gave them to Betzalel in that order, as if that was the proper order of construction. This understanding is also difficult; didn't Mosheh understand that the precedence of the Aron and vessels was one of purpose, not process? Why would he insist that Betzalel first build the vessels, if that order was only given to him to explain the telos of the Mishkan?

VII

REVELATION AND ENCOUNTER

In order to answer this question, we will have to address a larger question about the command of the Mishkan.

As I pointed out above (and in [our shiur on Parashat Yitro this year](#)), the only reason that the B'nei Yisra'el only heard ten statements directly from God is because they interrupted the prophecy due to their own fear - and asked Mosheh to approach God and receive the rest of the commandments. If they had not done so, what would we have heard from God? Although it stands to reason that we would have gotten all 613 of the Mitzvot directly from God, the text doesn't bear this out. After Mosheh received the contents of Sefer haB'rit (20:19-23:33), God called him up to the mountain, to receive the "Tablets of stone, the Torah and the Mitzvah which I have written in order to instruct them." (24:12). Although the B'nei Yisra'el were originally supposed to receive the contents of the Sefer haB'rit directly from God, the commands regarding the Mishkan (which, following the sequence of the text, are the sum total of the commands which Mosheh received atop the mountain. This point is certainly debatable and depends on how we understand Vayyikra 25:1 and 27:34 - see Ramban on 25:1) were to be given in seclusion to Mosheh - for him to transmit to the B'nei Yisra'el. In other words, the B'nei Yisra'el were never meant to receive the commands regarding the Mishkan directly from God, only through Mosheh Rabbenu.

Why the distinction? Why were all of the commands included in Parashat Mishpatim meant to be given directly to us, but not the commands of the Mishkan?

VIII

TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE

All religions grapple with an essential dialectic about God and His Presence. On the one hand, existence is impossible without God, hence God must be omnipresent. Conversely, there is no place that could possibly "encompass" God - so He is transcendent. As Rav Aharon Lichtenstein points out:

There are philosophies which understand Godliness as something transcendental, very distant - God lives in "heaven" with no connection to the material, corporeal and loathsome earth. In contrast, there are other philosophies which regard God as being immanent, extremely near, like a person's best friend - God is in the world and the world is God. This approach identifies God with nature.

Judaism completely rejects both approaches. We believe that "God encompasses the world; the world does not encompass God." At the same time, though, God is near to us and watches over us constantly. (from a Sichah given in Yeshivat Har Etzion, Shabbat Parashat Vayetze, 5750; Rav Lichtenstein did not review this translation).

IX

SANCTIFICATION AND ENCOUNTER

Our life of Mitzvot reflects this tension. On the one hand, we endeavor to sanctify every corner of our life - from our business interactions to family relationships, how we eat, how we mourn and how we celebrate. Nevertheless, we recognize that our attempts to bring God into this world and make our lives and surroundings holy fall significantly short of the impossible - to "capture" God's essence in this world. (A student of the Kabbalah or a metaphysician would be in a much better position to explain this, but I'll try...) The elements of Godliness which we experience and internalize through Mitzvot are significant - no doubt about that. Nevertheless, we cannot touch the essence of God, although we are aware of its existence.

The Mitzvot included in Sefer haB'rit reflect the range of human activity through which God's Presence is made manifest in this world - through ethical interaction, individual moral greatness, the creation and maintenance of a just society and personal sanctification through celebration and restraint (read 20:19-23:29 carefully - note what is included and what is not). What is notably missing there is the human encounter with the Divine - that belongs not to the *deus revelatus* (revealed God), rather to the transcendent God.

Enter: **The Mishkan**. [Following Ramban's explanation,] just as **Ma'amad Har Sinai** (the stand at Sinai) was a unique and powerful encounter with the Divine, so the ongoing "meeting" in the Mishkan would continue that encounter. The Mishkan is our expression and acknowledgment that God's Presence is not "ours for the taking", it is not available at our whim (the thinking which generated the frenzy around the golden calf - see above) - rather, God chooses to meet with us at certain times, in a certain place and with one representative of our people - Mosheh Rabbenu. The "mysterium tremendum" is always just out of our grasp - a reminder that no matter how much we bring God into this world, there are divisions of time (when God chooses to meet with us), space (the divisions in the

Mishkan and around it) and spirituality (only Mosheh was addressed in the Mishkan) which keep us from "owning" the mystery - or any part of it.

This explains why the commands of the Mishkan were never meant to be given to the people; they were meant to be clothed in the mystery of seclusion and private revelation, elevating Mosheh and signifying the special nature of these Mitzvot and the building around which they are focused.

X

MOSHEH AND BETZALEL - A DIFFERENCE IN PERSPECTIVE

We can now return to the dialogue between Mosheh and Betzalel. Mosheh, as the one person who had been "inside" the mystery, saw the Mishkan "from atop the mountain" - from the perspective of the Aron and the Testimony inside of it. He saw the K'ruvim atop the Aron from where he would continue to encounter God and receive more commands. From Mosheh's perspective, the **Mechitzot** (walls) of the Mishkan belong to the outside - as he experiences God directly.

Betzalel's position, on the other hand, is "in the shade of God" - like the rest of us. When we see the Mishkan, we see the walls which keep us from the Divine, which shelter the earthly conduit to transcendence. Mosheh wanted Betzalel to build the Mishkan from the inside out - from his perspective. He only acceded to Betzalel's wiser suggestion after pointing out that it represents a position which is "in the shade of God", not in His direct light - the position occupied by everyone who was not atop the mountain.

POSTSCRIPT

This may explain the glow on Mosheh's face (34:30) when he descended the mountain after achieving our forgiveness from God - a glow which frightened the people in much the same way as the Revelation on Sinai.

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