

SIYYUM ON SEFER SH'MOT

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

As recorded in the Gemara (BT Shabbat 118b), it is traditional to celebrate the conclusion of the study of a book of Torah. Whereas this tradition chiefly impacts on the study of a Massechet (Tractate) of Talmud or a Seder (Order) of Mishnah, it is certainly applicable to the completion of a book of the Torah. This "concluding celebration" is known as a "Siyyum".

I

AN OVERVIEW OF SEFER SH'MOT

As we come to the conclusion of this Sefer, it is appropriate to look back on the past 11 weeks of study (and "leining") and try to get a sense of the larger picture of Sh'mot. Even though (as noted earlier), chapter/verse divisions in the Torah are a Christian invention from the 11th century, the division of the Torah into five books is inherent in the text itself and built into the structure of the physical Sefer Torah from which we read. As such, it stands to reason that this unit, called Sefer Sh'mot, has an underlying theme which informs its narrative and legal passages and which finds its denouement at the conclusion of the Sefer.

The Sefer divides, quite easily, into several sections, as follows:

I. Exodus (Chapters 1:1-13:16)

- A. Description of Servitude
- B. Selection of Mosheh
- C. Plagues
- D. Korban Pesach
- E. Exodus

II. Travels (13:17-18:27)

- A. The Splitting of the Reed Sea
- B. The Song at the Sea

- C. Thirst, Hunger, Thirst
- D. Amalek
- E. Interaction with Yitro

III. Giving of the Torah (19:1-24:18)

- A. Agreement to Enter the Covenant
- B. The Ten Statements
- C. The "Mishpatim" given to Mosheh
- D. The covenant ceremony

IV. Commands of the Mishkan (25:1-31:17)

V. Golden Calf (31:18-34:35)

- A. The Sin
- B. Mosheh's plea for Divine compassion
- C. Mosheh's chastisement of the people
- D. Second plea for Compassion
- E. The Divine agreement to stay with the people
- F. The Second Tablets
- G. The recovenancing

VI. Construction of the Mishkan (35:1 - 40:38)

II

DETAIL AND REPETITION

It would be simplest to posit a three-fold theme - Exodus, Covenant and Mishkan. First of all, God brought the B'nei Yisra'el out of Egypt, then He brought them close to Mount Sinai in order to initiate an encounter and enter into a covenant with them - and finally, to command them (and see the fulfillment of the command) to build a Mishkan. While this is an accurate overview, it would be more satisfying - and, hopefully, more intellectually honest and probing - to isolate and identify one theme which ties these three notions together.

Before exploring the theme of the Sefer, there is a textual oddity relating to the Mishkan which we must address - considering that it constitutes over a fourth of the Sefer.

Whereas the laws of the Torah are usually given in brief form - either general overview (e.g. "You may not do any M'lakhah on Shabbat), case law (e.g. "if a person gives his fellow a donkey...") or coded phrases ("You shall put a sign on your hand) - the details of the Mishkan are spelled out in almost excruciating detail. Every item, its length, width and height; the materials from which it is made and so on are delineated such that these commands take up 7 complete chapters (if we include the details of the sanctification of the Kohanim) in Sefer S'hmot. Why the detailed description, so atypical of legal text in the Torah?

A second question (which we addressed in our shiur on Parashat Terumah - you can find it at <http://www.torah.org/advanced/mikra/sh/dt.57.2.07.html>) comes on the heels of this one. After reading about God's detailed commands to Mosheh regarding the construction of the Mishkan, we are presented with an equally detailed description of the fulfillment of those commands by the B'nei Yisra'el under the direction of Betzalel. As much as we are bothered by the wordiness and minutiae of these commands, their repetition stands all the more in stark distinction to the way we usually read the Torah.

Following these two questions - detail and repetition - we can ask them again when we look at the description of the offerings of the N'si'im (heads of the tribes) in Bamidbar Chapter 7. Each tribe brought the common offering (see there), which is described in detail, on successive days during the first 12 days of the first month. Why does the Torah repeat this offering in all of its detail twelve times? Wouldn't it have been sufficient - and efficient - to present the offering once and then indicate which Nasi brought for his tribe on which day? Over 60 verses (longer than several complete Parashiot!) could have been "shaved" if the Torah had followed this briefer form; why is the "longer version" given?

We will have to file these questions - all of which are different ways of asking the same question - until we address our original topic: What is the theme of Sefer Sh'mot?

III

FROM THREE THEMES TO TWO

Ramban, in his introduction to Parashat Terumah, explains the purpose of the Mishkan in a fashion which helps us "whittle down" the broad themes of Sefer Sh'mot from three to two.

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 travelled 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:

- * 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);
- * 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);
- * The Cloud created by the Incense Altar (30:1-10) symbolizes the Cloud that covered Mount Sinai (19:9, 24:15-18);
- * The Fire on the Altar (Vayyikra 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).

We can now define two overarching themes in the Sefer - Exodus and Encounter. The first 13 chapters detail the successful political liberation of the B'nei Yisra'el from Egypt - (the next few chapters are the bridge which brings them to Sinai) and the rest of the Sefer is dedicated to bringing the B'nei Yisra'el into encounter with God. That encounter begins with the Revelation at Sinai and continues with the construction of the Mishkan. The encounter theme is interrupted by the narrative of the golden calf - which we will explore a bit further on.

Before pursuing our attempt to isolate the one theme which ties the Sefer together, it is appropriate to share a wonderful insight (which I first saw in a marvelous book about the Beit HaMikdash titled "The Temple" by Rabbi Joshua Berman - highly recommended!) on the Mishkan and its role.

IV

RETURN TO THE GARDEN

At the center of the Mishkan (thus the heart of the Camp), sitting in the Kodesh Kodoshim (sanctum sanctorum), sat the Aron (Ark), housing the Tablets of Testimony. These tablets symbolize the most powerful revelation experienced by Man and are representative of Torah. Sitting above the Aron was a Kaporet (gold covering), above which (but fashioned from the same piece of gold) were the K'ruvim - (Cherubim). These K'ruvim show up in only one other context in the Torah narrative - as the sentinels, guarding the path into Eden after Adam's expulsion. Specifically, they were set up to "guard the path to the Tree of Life".

The Tree of Life, in Mishleic metaphor, is the Torah (see Mishlei 3:18). The K'ruvim which guarded Adam's path to the Tree of Life now guard the "new" Tree of Life - the Torah.

Rabbi Berman suggests two approaches to the Mikdash-Eden analogy. On the one hand, the Mikdash may represent the ideal of Eden. Just as God is described as Mit'halekh (walking) in the Garden (B'resheet 3:8), so God says:

I will place my Mishkan in your midst, and I shall not abhor you. V'hit'halakhti b'tokhakhem (And I will walk among you - (same word as Mit'halekh)), and will be your God, and you shall be my people. (Vayyikra 26:11-12) Just as Adam's accountability was higher when in the Garden (=nearness to God), so too the level of purity and sanctity which must be maintained within the Mishkan is higher.

Alternatively, he suggests that the Mishkan is a "post-expulsion" replacement for Eden. While it would be inappropriate to replicate too much of his thesis here, one point will suffice to make the point. The multiple levels of distance (Kodesh/Kodesh haKodoshim) and the presence of the K'ruvim (both woven into the Parokhet [curtain] dividing the Kodesh from the Kodesh haKodoshim and in gold over the Aron) seem to make the statement that the distance caused by the original expulsion is permanent and that the Mishkan is as close as any human can come to reentering - but can not truly come all the way back.

Following this general thesis, we can now find a greater "inclusio" at the end of Sefer Sh'mot. Instead of being a fitting conclusion to the Sinai experience (as per Ramban), with God's Presence now accessible to the B'nei Yisra'el as they travel, the end of our Sefer concludes a saga whose onset is at the beginning of B'resheet. The intervening chapters (from B'resheet 3 until the end of Sh'mot) are, effectively, the story of Man's attempt to return to the Garden. The end of Sh'mot gives us either the "mini-return" afforded to us by God - or the closest possible access.

While this approach is appealing and has much merit, it still leaves us searching for a unifying theme within Sefer Sh'mot. Let's turn to the beginning of the Sefer for some clues.

V

V'ELE SH'MOT B'NEI YISRA'EL

Our Sefer begins with a recounting of the descent of Ya'akov's children to Egypt:

These are the names of the sons of Yisra'el who came to Egypt with Ya'akov, each with his household: Re'uven, Shim'on, Levi, and Yehudah; Yissachar, Zevulun, and Binyamin; Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The total number of people born to Ya'akov was seventy. Yoseph was already in Egypt. (1:1-5)

This introduction is difficult on two counts:

* It seems superfluous, as we have already been told about the descent of Ya'akov's household - along with a complete listing of the names of the family members - in B'resheet 46 (vv. 8-27);

* In that earlier counting, the grandchildren were listed - whereas here, only the sons appear.

The Rishonim are sensitive to these problems and are divided in their approaches to a resolution.

Rashi (ad loc.) says that this recounting shows the depth of God's love for the B'nei Yisra'el - just as He lovingly "brings out" the stars every night and calls them by name - and then calls them by name when He "puts them away" (see Yeshaya 40:26); similarly, He reckons the B'nei Yisra'el in their lifetime (in B'resheet) and again after their death (at the beginning of Sh'mot).

Ramban (ad loc.), while favoring the sentiments expressed in Rashi's approach, challenges it as an accurate reading of p'shat in the verse. Ramban suggests that the book of Sh'mot is an holistic unit - telling the story of redemption. As such, the story had to pick up from the roots of servitude - from which that redemption would take place. Even though we had already learned of the descent into Egypt (indeed, the last four chapters of B'resheet take place there), the Torah wants to teach us one story in this Sefer and, as such, needs to begin it at the genesis of that story. There is a need for a short recap, bringing us back into the story of descent and oppression, setting the stage for redemption.

Ramban explains that since this is only a recap, there was no need to list the entire family, just the heads of household (Re'uven, Shim'on etc.).

Ramban anticipates the challenge that if the theme of this Sefer is redemption (as it is sometimes called Sefer haG'ulah - the book of redemption), why doesn't it end when the B'nei Yisra'el exit Egypt? Why are the stand at Sinai and the construction of the Mishkan included in this Sefer?

He explains that G'ulah implies a restoration to previous glory. When the Avot (patriarchs) resided in Eretz Yisra'el, they interacted with God and His Presence was felt among them. Only after restoring His Glory to the camp and assuring the welcome of His Presence in the Mishkan were they truly redeemed and "restored to the stature of their ancestors."

Building on the Ramban, I would like to suggest another understanding of the underlying theme of our Sefer in a way that integrates Rashi's approach to the beginning of the Sefer and which explains the repetition and details of the construction of the Mishkan.

VI

SH'MOT B'NEI YISRA'EL IN THE MISHKAN

Among all of the vestments and vessels in the Mishkan, only three had some form of writing on them:

* The Hoshen (breastpiece) worn by Aharon. The Hoshen had four rows of three precious stones each (parenthetically, the prophet identifies nine of these twelve precious stones as being in Eden! - see Yehezqe'el 28:13). Each stone was engraved with the name of one of the tribes:

So Aharon shall bear the names of the B'nei Yisra'el in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart

when he goes into the holy place, for a continual remembrance before YHVH. (Sh'mot 28:21)

* The shoulder-pieces of the Ephod (apron) worn by Aharon. Each piece had an onyx stone and between the two stones, all twelve names (Re'uven, Shim'on etc.) were engraved:

You shall set the two stones on the shoulder-pieces of the ephod, as stones of remembrance for the B'nei Yisra'el; and Aharon shall bear their names before YHVH on his two shoulders for remembrance. (ibid. v. 9)

Aharon is to wear them as a Zikkaron (remembrance) - what is the goal of this Zikkaron? Is it to be a remembrance before God, that He should bless His people? Is it something for the B'nei Yisra'el to remember?

Note that in 28:28, we are commanded that the Hoshen and Ephod are not to be separated.

* The Tzitz (headband) worn by Aharon. On the Tzitz, the words KODESH LASHEM (holy to God) were represented (ibid. v. 36)

What is the meaning behind these words and their presence as a Zikkaron in the Mishkan?

Let's look back at the stated purpose of the Mishkan: "Let them build for Me a Mikdash, that I may dwell among them" (25:8). The Mishkan was to be a vehicle through which God would manifest His Presence among the B'nei Yisra'el. Aharon's job - as the great Ohev Yisra'el (lover of Israel) - was to be the "shadkhan" (matchmaker) between God and His people. He was to bring the B'nei Yisra'el back to God, by bringing them into the Mishkan. Carrying their names at all times was a reminder to Aharon of his task. He was not in the midst of the holiest possible place on his own merit, rather, he was there as a representative of two sides - God and the B'nei Yisra'el.

This explains why there was one garment with their names - but why both the Hoshen and the Ephod? In addition, why did the Hoshen carry each name on its own stone, whereas the Ephod combined them into two onyx stones?

VII

THE GOAL OF DIVINE WORSHIP

Avodat Hashem - the worship of God - demands a delicate balance between individual expression and communalism. Although there is a great deal to be said for communal worship, as the members stand as one unit and in common practice, nonetheless, it is not the Torah's goal to obliterate the individual talents, needs, creative urges or expressions found in each member of the community. Some religions maintain an ideal of group worship, where the individual submerges and negates his or her own needs into the expression of the group (perhaps the strongest and most frightening examples of this extreme are contemporary "cults"). Others (such as some schools of Zen) place the entire emphasis on individual expression - paying little or no heed to the power of the community.

In both Halakhic and extra-Halakhic literature, the sensitive balance between individual and community is addressed. On the one hand, we pray the most central prayer - T'fillah - silently. On the other - it is (during the day) followed by a public repetition, known as T'fillat haTzibbur - the prayer of the community.

God's directive to us contains both of these pulls - "You shall be a Kingdom of Kohanim and a Holy Nation" on the one hand; "You shall worship YHWH your God with all of your heart..." on the other.

The Mishkan is the nexus of our worship of God. Even worship which takes place outside of the Mishkan is oriented around it (note what direction we face when saying T'fillah). Aharon's job was to bring the B'nei Yisra'el back into encounter with God - on two almost opposing levels. He was to (help Mosheh) lead them as a nation, as a community, as a group. He was also to lead each of them - in his or her own way - into a more sincere and honest encounter with God. Thus, he had to carry their names as individuals (represented by the individual tribes), each in his own glory (represented by a different precious stone) - and as a group. Note that the two stones on the ephod shoulder-pieces were both onyx - and (following Rambam's approach - see MT K'lei Mikdash 9:9) the names were listed in birth order, alternating between the right and left shoulder-pieces. This is clearly a statement about the unification of the families into one unit.

The third component - the Tzitz - was the focus through which this worship was able to unify the people. Note that the individual representation of the names sat on Aharon's breast; moving up towards his head (where the Tzitz rested) were the two shoulder-pieces which unified their names. The message is fairly self-explanatory: The method by which the tribes of Ya'akov properly unite is in their common focus upward towards God.

VIII

THE MISHKAN AS A COMMEMORATION OF THE EXODUS

We can now posit a third role of the Mishkan. Not only is it a return to Eden and a continuation of Sinai - it is also a commemoration of the Exodus (Zekher liY'tzi'at Mitzrayim). The Exodus is introduced by the listing of the Sh'mot B'nei Yisra'el who descended into Egypt (away from God's presence - see B'resheet 46:4 and Rashi ad loc.; compare with Vayyikra 18:1-3). As mentioned above (in Ramban's name), the entire goal of the Exodus was to bring them back to the lofty stature of their ancestors - with the Shekhinah (Divine Presence) resting among them. That is why the Torah begins Sefer Sh'mot with a partial listing of their names - unlike the narrative in B'resheet which is telling a story, the opening paragraph in our Sefer is setting a scene. These names have been exiled from the Shekhinah! Their return is only assured when Aharon comes into the Mishkan with these same twelve names on his vestments - thus bringing these names, both as individuals and as a unit (on the Ephod) back into the proximity of God's Presence, back to the gates of Eden. The very existence of the Mishkan, with all of its vessels and Kohanic vestments, stands as a commemoration of the renewed nearness of God's cherished people - and of the balance of individual and community in

Divine worship.

We now understand why the Torah places such an emphasis on detail in building the Mishkan - because, as the very focus of our relationship with God, we need to remember that every step in the Mishkan must be exact and deliberate (note what happens to Nadav and Avihu when they fail to comply); just as the standards in the Garden of Eden were very exacting, so too in this Dwelling Place for God. Whereas other Mitzvot serve as vehicles of worship, the Mishkan is the nexus of that worship and must be guarded and cared for much more scrupulously.

This seems to be the reason for the repetition of the details of the Mishkan (not only command - also fulfillment). In the intervening time, the B'nei Yisra'el had tried to worship via their own methods (not commanded by God) - and they ended up with a golden calf that served as the archetype of all future sin and punishment (see 32:34). Thus, the description which repeats, like a refrain, that they built each component "just as God had commanded Mosheh", serves to indicate a realization that the only way to enter God's Presence is - on His terms!

We also understand the repetition of the offerings of the N'si'im in Bamidbar 7. Even though each one brought the same offering as the others, indicating the "communal" approach to worship, each one brought his own intention and motivation to that service (see Midrash Rabbah ad loc.) - supporting the individual component of Avodat Hashem. The Torah repeats them to show us this lesson - that although we may have a common worship structure, we (not only may, but must) bring our own personalities, conflicts, concerns etc. to the act of worship, making it our own and solidifying our own relationship with haKadosh Barukh Hu.

IX

POSTSCRIPT: KODESH YISRA'EL L'YHVH

At the end of the first prophecy of Yirmiyah, the prophet relates:

The word of YHVH came to me, saying: Go proclaim in the ears of Yerushalayim, Thus says YHVH: I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Kodesh Yisra'el L'YHVH (Yisra'el was holy to YHVH), the first fruits of his harvest. All who ate of it were held guilty; disaster came upon them, says YHVH. (Yirmiyah 2:1-3).

In this passage, Yirmiyah uses an odd phrasing to describe the relationship between God and the B'nei Yisra'el - Kodesh Yisra'el Lashem. What does this mean?

Following our explanation of the Hoshen-Ephod-Tzitz continuum (the seeds of which came from a shiur by R. Elyakim Krumbein of Yeshivat Har Etzion), it seems that Yirmiyah is describing a (tragically) past relationship in which (the name of the B'nei) Yisra'el fit between the words Kodesh and Lashem which sat upon the Tzitz. Note how Yirmiyah associates this relationship with our travels in the desert - when we had the Mishkan at the heart of our camp, assuring us not only of God's

Presence but of our place in that Edenic Sanctuary.

HAZAK HAZAK V'NIT'HAZEK

Text Copyright © 2010 by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom and **Torah.org**. The author is Educational Coordinator of the Jewish Studies Institute of the Yeshiva of Los Angeles.