

Vayakhel 5774
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In his book *The Home We Build Together*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks offers a wonderful reading of the building of the Mishkan. Why, he asks, do we spend four entire Torah portions on the construction of this sanctuary? And why does this project come where it does, after the Exodus from Egypt and the Israelites' receiving of the Torah at Sinai? Rabbi Sacks answers this question: "Freedom cannot be conferred by an outside force," he writes. "It can be achieved only by collective, collaborative effort on the part of the people themselves." It isn't enough, Rabbi Sacks explains, to be liberated by God, or even to accept God's law. Ultimately, to become a community, the people must create something together, and that something is the Mishkan. "A people is made by making. A nation is built by building."

Rabbi Sacks buttresses his point by reminding us of the striking linguistic parallels between the construction of the Mishkan and the opening chapter of Genesis, most notably the prominent place of Shabbat in both accounts. In fact, one of the ways the Talmud understands the origin of the 39 forbidden labors of Shabbat is by locating them in the construction of the Mishkan. The *melechet machshevet*, the creative and purposeful work of building the Mishkan, becomes the paradigm of the work we rest from on Shabbat. And thus the process of Mishkan-building becomes a metaphor for our own creative work, imitating God's creative work, on the six days of the workweek.

If this is the case, then it would seem that the Mishkan was part of the plan all along. God must have known that the people would need to engage in this joint collective effort, and therefore God planned for them to build the Tabernacle. This is of course the reading of Ramban, who argues that the Mishkan was something God always planned on. Rashi disagrees, and says the Mishkan was a concession to the people after the sin of the Golden Calf. His reading is also possible within Rabbi Sacks's formulation: God learned a lesson, the lesson that people need to jointly create in order to become united and take ownership, and hence God instructed the Israelites to build the Mishkan.

In either case, however, there's a further implication to Rabbi Sacks's observation, and that is this: If a community is made in the process of making, what happens when the Mishkan gives way to the Beit Hamikdash, the holy Temple in Jerusalem? What happens when we are no longer contributing and sewing and baking and building? What happens when we no longer have to put up and take down and carry and reassemble the Mishkan? What happens when the temporary becomes permanent?

The haftarot of these parshiot tell us of Solomon's building of the Temple in Jerusalem. Though there are clear parallels in the two stories, the Temple is a very different structure than the Mishkan: it is larger, it is made of more durable materials, and it is made to last for eternity. The process of making the two structures was also notably different. The Mishkan, of course, was made through the contributions of all whose hearts moved them to contribute. The invitation to contribution in Parshat Teruma is mirrored by an outpouring of giving in Parshat Vayakhel. Moses doesn't have to pressure anyone to give; more people want to contribute than can even be accommodated. Compare this with how the book of Kings describes Solomon's building of the Temple: He imposed conscription, drafting

30,000 men into servitude, to bring the project into existence. The word used here is *mas*. Just before the account of Solomon's building project, we are told several times about Solomon's wisdom, his *chochma*. What is truly striking is that these two words are both key words in the story of Pharaoh's treatment of the Israelites in the opening chapter of Exodus: *hava nitchakma lo*, let us deal wisely with them, he says, lest they make war against us. What does he do? He imposes on them *sarei misim*, task-masters, masters of *mas*. While I do not mean to suggest that Solomon is comparable to Pharaoh, I do think the Tanakh is signaling us a message about the processes of institutional exercises of power. Institutionalization inherently involves depersonalization. The contrast with the Mishkan, and its language of *nedivut-lev*, free-will giving and contribution, is stark.

For most of my life, I've found myself drawn to organizations that weren't quite institutions. I've almost always *davened* in a *minyán* in which the *mechitza* needed to be put up every week, the siddurim brought out, the *aron* arranged. I have been attracted to the communities that inhabit and build these spaces, and I have been an active participant and leader in them. By the same token, I have generally stayed away from synagogues that felt more like institutions—where the mechitza is a fixture, where, the siddurim are on immovable shelves, where the aron is built into the wall. Something happens, I find, when the Mishkan becomes the Mikdash—something that feels alienating, uninviting, too comfortable and permanent. I have a harder time davening, I have a harder time feeling God's presence. Maybe that's my own problem, but I think many of us share that feeling.

B'chol dor va-dor chayav adam lirot et atzmo k'ilu hu yatza mimitzrayim: In every generation, each person is obligated to see him/herself as if s/he came out of Egypt. While we locate this mitzvah in the seder, the truth is it applies to us all the time. We formally remember the Exodus from Egypt twice a day through the recitation of the Shema. We are commanded to have an Exodus consciousness. We can't do that all the time, though, so we highlight it particularly at Pesach. I would suggest that a similar gesture occurs through Sukkot, which reminds that, in some ways, the temporary is more preferable to the ideal: *Kol shiva yamim adam oseh sukkato keva v'dirato arai*, All seven days of the festival, a person makes his Sukkah permanent, and his house temporary, says the Mishnah.

If we are to take Rabbi Sacks at his word—and I do, in this case—then part of our Exodus consciousness is the notion that we are to be continually involved in the work of building the Mishkan. I don't think that's only a metaphor; I think it's real, as evidenced by the message of the Sukkah. In our own community, as we contemplate growth and change and permanence, I would ask us all to consider this question: What is gained, and what is lost, when the temporary becomes permanent, when the Mishkan becomes the Mikdash?

Shabbat shalom.