

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayakhel Pekudai
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Vayakhel Pekudai – There is nothing as permanent as something that is meant to be temporary¹

I remember when I was a young child, my school ran out of space. They had plans to extend the school building. But these things take time. As a temporary, stop-gap measure, they brought in some portable buildings to use as makeshift classrooms. It was a good idea. The buildings were not uncomfortable and they would function fine for a short term solution. Needless to say, when I graduated from school years later the temporary classrooms were still there. If the school had not moved to a different campus, I am sure that those temporary classrooms would still be there today.

In this week's double Parasha of Vayakhel Pekudai, we read about the building of the Mishkan. This was a portable “house for Hashem's Shechinah” that Bnei Yisrael carried with them during the 40 years that they wandered in the wilderness. It was a place to offer korbanot to Hashem and for Bnei Yisrael to experience an unparalleled closeness to Hashem. It was also the location where Moshe communicated with Hashem. It was a temporary structure that was dismantled each time that Bnei Yisrael broke camp and re-assembled at each of their temporary dwelling places.

At the time that the Mishkan was first built, it was not supposed to be in use for the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Bnei Yisrael were supposed to leave Har Sinai and go straight to the Land of Israel. The decree of them wandering for 40 years only came later. So the temporary Mishkan was now to be used for a bit longer than planned. When Bnei Yisrael finally entered their permanent home in the Land of Israel, Hashem wanted them to build a permanent structure to replace the Mishkan. That was the Bet HaMikdash in Yerushalayim. It took a while until Shlomo HaMelech finally built the Bet HaMikdash and in the meantime the temporary Mishkan was in commission for even longer. When King Shlomo built the Bet HaMikdash² he spent seven years building a huge and magnificent edifice. The pasukim describe in great detail how large and seemingly permanent the structure was. Unfortunately, due to the Jewish people's sins, the Bet HaMikdash was not permanent. And neither was the second one. We are still waiting for the third Bet HaMikdash which, as promised by our Prophets, will be permanent.

So we have two version of Hashem's dwelling place in the world – the temporary Mishkan and the permanent Bet HaMikdash. Which one does Hashem want more? Even though temporary buildings are often used for much longer than originally anticipated, at the end of the day they are still temporary. No-one would choose a temporary structure over a permanent structure. If given a choice, no-one would set up a house that is designed to be temporary with the intention of using it permanently.

However, this begs a question. If the Bet HaMikdash is the ultimate and permanent dwelling place for the Shechinah, then why does the Torah devote so much space to the construction of the temporary Mishkan? In sefer Shmot approximately 13 chapters are devoted to describing the building of the Mishkan. In Parshiyot Terumah and Tetzaveh we have the detailed instructions, and then in this week's double portion of Vayakhel Pekudai, we read about these same details again when Bnei Yisrael actually carries out the instructions by constructing it. Note that some of this detail relates to the building of utensils that were used both in the Mishkan and in the permanent Bet HaMikdash. Yet there are many words of the Torah devoted to the building of a temporary structure. Why is this? What is Hashem trying to teach us?

¹ This week's Darchai Noam is inspired by a dvar Torah that I heard from Rabbi Libor at Yeshivat Shaalvim in March 2018.

² See Malachim Aleph chapters 5 and 6.

To suggest an answer to this question, we need to explore the differences between a permanent structure and a temporary structure. They each have an important advantage and a disadvantage. A permanent structure is always there. It is reliable and steadfast. But on the other hand, its very permanence may come at a price. If something is always there, it can be taken for granted. Even though the Bet HaMikdash was such a holy place, if people feel too familiar there, they may start to treat it as less special. On the other hand, the Mishkan is only temporary. It is here one day and gone the next. That is a disadvantage. But on the other hand, its temporary nature gives it a feeling of newness, freshness and excitement.

Of course, the permanent structure is more ideal. But perhaps we can suggest that Hashem wants us to build a permanent structure that retains the characteristics of a temporary structure. One that is not taken for granted or treated lightly. One that is appreciated and loved. Perhaps that is why the Torah devotes so much space to detailing the construction of the Mishkan.

A similar idea can be seen in relation to the pasukim that are recited when wrapping the tefillin around our fingers. The tefillin represent the unique relationship between us and Hashem and the straps of the tefillin are like a marriage ring. As we wrap the “ring” around our finger we recite some beautiful pasukim from the book of Hosea³ that contain the language of marriage. The first pasuk states ‘I will betroth you to me forever’. The word ‘betroth’ refers to the first stage of marriage – the temporary state of kiddushin before a husband and wife become fully married⁴. However, the pasuk refers to betrothal *forever*. There seems to be a contradiction. Betrothal is temporary, marriage is permanent. However, the excitement and intense emotion associated with the temporary state of betrothal can be much stronger than that associated with the permanent state of marriage. When reciting this pasuk we are declaring that we want to have an eternal relationship with Hashem but we also want to retain all of the passion and excitement of a new relationship.

These days, we no longer have the Mishkan or the Bet HaMikdash. But we do have the ‘Mikdash me’at’ – the small Mikdash – which are our shuls. Unfortunately, this past year we lost access to them too due to the pandemic. Only recently are some communities slowly starting to regain access. Maybe now that we are regaining access, we can implement the above lesson by making sure we do not take our shuls for granted. These are a number of halachot on this issue which deserve a separate shiur of their own, but at a very high level, we should make an extra effort to avoid acting in a frivolous or light headed manner in shul. Any discussions that do not relate to Torah or Tefilla should be saved for outside shul.⁵ When entering the shul each day remember to recite the special pasukim that describe the holiness and awe that we should feel and pay attention to the meaning of the words.⁶

We can also apply this same lesson to our relationships. Unfortunately, in our lives the people that we see most often are often the people that we take for granted. We should work hard to remember the excitement that we had when the relationship first began and try to hold on to those feelings. Pausing before we interact with someone and contemplating this idea for a moment can make a big difference. It may involve some hard work, but if we are at least aware of this issue we have taken the first step. Our hearts and our relationships can then be like a Mishkan which retains the freshness and excitement of a temporary dwelling.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Focus on our long term relationships and try to remember what it was like when the relationship first began. Try to recapture those feelings.
2. For those that are allowed back into shul to daven and learn, remember that a shul is a small Mikdash – a holy place that should not be taken for granted and needs to be treated with respect. Try to feel genuine excitement, awe and joy and try to retain this feeling permanently.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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³ Hosea 2:21-22.

⁴ This is somewhat akin to the concept of engagement but there are significant halachic differences.

⁵ See Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 151:1 for more details of these halachot, and other related halachot.

⁶ See page 12 of the standard Ashkenaz siddur.