

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 – Internal vs External

In this week's double Parsha of Vayakhel/Pekudai we read about the building and inauguration of the Mishkan and its accessories. After much work, the portable sanctuary that accompanied Bnei Yisrael in the desert for forty years was finally completed.

The Mishkan seems to have been designed inside out.¹ From the outside, the Mishkan looked like a typical tent. It had a nicely embroidered covering, but it did not stand out as anything special. When one entered into the courtyard, one would see a large copper alter. As one travelled deeper into the interior, the quality of the accessories increased. The interior of the sanctuary was divided into two rooms. The first room, known as the Kodesh (the Holy) contained three beautiful golden items – the menorah, the table and another alter. The innermost room was known as the Kodesh Hakodashim (the Holy of Holies). It contained the most precious item of all – the Holy Ark with the beautiful golden cherubim which housed the original luchot (tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written) that Hashem gave to Moshe at Har Sinai.

The outside of the Mishkan was accessible to all of Bnei Yisrael. In contrast, only select people were allowed inside. The deeper inside one travelled, the more restricted became the admission. Only Kohanim were allowed into the Kodesh. And only the Kohen Gadol was allowed into the Kodesh Hakodashim, and even then only on Yom Kippur.

It seems counterintuitive to store the most precious parts of the Mishkan hidden away inside where they could not be enjoyed and appreciated by everyone. However, this reveals an important lesson for us. It teaches us that the superficial aspects of life are less important. Our 'p'nimi', or what is on our inside, is much more important. It is common for us to place more emphasis on external appearances, perhaps because that is what we see first. And perhaps because this is the tendency of the secular society in which we live. It requires effort to go beneath the surface, to understand and connect to the true worth of something or someone.

This concept is supported by a fascinating insight of the Vilna Gaon. In relation to the laws of kashrut the Torah lists four animals that only contain one of the two necessary kosher signs and are thus deemed not kosher. The first three animals (the camel, the hyrax and the hare) only contain the 'inner sign' of chewing their cud. This sign is more internal to the animal and less obvious to the observer. These three animals lack the outward, more obvious, sign of split hooves. The pig, the fourth animal on the list, contains the outward, obvious sign of split hooves, but it lacks the more internalised sign – that of chewing its cud. The pig thus represents hypocrisy. It lies on the ground with its 'kosher'-looking feet spread out in front, as if to say "look, I am kosher". However, deep inside, the pig is actually not kosher.

The Midrash compares these four animals to the four kingdoms under which Bnei Yisrael were exiled. The pig is compared to Edom/Rome under whom we are suffering until today. (Even though Edom/Rome has now been replaced by modern, Western, secularism, the exile is the same as we haven't yet been given back the Bet Hamikdash). Just like the pig, this fourth 'kingdom' is hypocritical. From the outside it appears 'kosher' – exhibiting such features as freedom and civil rights. However, on the inside, it is antithetical to Judaism. And it is the pig, more than any other animal, that is considered the epitome of non-kosher.

The Vilna Gaon also explains the four exiles in terms of these four non-kosher animals. However, he explains the symbolism differently. He explains that the animals represent the Jewish people during these

¹ This idea is based on a dvar Torah that I heard from Rav Gideon Binyamin, the Rav of Nof Ayalon.

exiles. The first three exiles are represented by the three animals that have the inward sign of being kosher (chewing their cud) but lack the outward sign (split hooves). Similarly, during these exiles, the Jewish people were strong on the inside (i.e. they had faith in Hashem) but they were lacking in their external features (i.e. mitzvah observance).

The fourth and current exile is represented by the pig. The Vilna Gaon explains that during this exile the Jewish people are strong on the outside, with strong communities, shuls and a lot of Torah learning; but weak on the inside. Our faith in Hashem and the pure intention behind our mitzvah observance is lacking. Though there are many Jewish people performing many mitzvot, they are often performed in a dry, ritualistic manner. The heart is lacking. Based on this approach, the fourth exile constitutes a time when superficiality dominates over depth and inner truth. We see this in society around us, and it is unfortunately reflected in our communities too. The lesson we learn from the Mishkan can counteract this, that is, the importance of focusing on the inner dimension and not just superficialities.

However, another story in the Gemara² seems to suggest that superficiality has its place and our inner intentions are less important. When Rabban Gamliel was the Nasi (the head of the Sanhedrin), he had a policy that only students whose inside (i.e., their thoughts and feelings) matched their outside (i.e., their conduct) were allowed into the study hall. When Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya briefly replaced Rabban Gamliel as Nasi, he changed the policy and allowed in anyone who wanted to study. As a result of this change in policy, there was a tremendous growth in the number of students and many outstanding halachic questions were able to be resolved. Rabban Gamliel became disheartened, fearing that his policy had prevented Bnei Yisrael from learning Torah. That night, Rabban Gamliel had a dream whose imagery suggested that the new students were worthless and that his policy had been correct. However, the Gemara teaches that this dream was only shown to Rabban Gamliel in order to ease his mind. In reality, the Gemara confirms that Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya's new policy was the better approach.

The above story suggests that what is on the outside is sufficient and it is not so important for one's superficial actions to be matched with inner kavana and pure intentions. This is based on the principle known as "מתוך שלא לשימיה בא לשימיה" – one should learn Torah and perform mitzvot, even without pure intentions, and eventually one will develop the right intentions.³ How can we reconcile this story with the truth that we learned above which we derived from the Mishkan about the importance of our 'p'nimi'?

Perhaps we can reconcile the two approaches as follows. When we look at ourselves, we need to focus on our inside. We should try to learn the lesson from the Mishkan and the Vilna Gaon quoted above and make sure that our thoughts and feelings and kavana match our external conduct and appearance. However, when it comes to other people, we should adopt the policy of Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya. Instead of concerning ourselves with others' intentions, we should simply accept their positive actions at face value. In this way we give other people the benefit of the doubt and we also give them a chance to improve and to develop their inner intentions.

We can also suggest that it depends on the type of mitzva being performed. Prayer, for example, is known as Avodat Halev – service of the heart. For this mitzva especially, our inner intentions are important. And since the service of the Mishkan was replaced with prayer, it makes sense that the lesson of the Mishkan itself would be particularly relevant to how we should conduct our tefillot – with more focus on our kavana.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to focus on and build up our own internal world – instead of simply fulfilling the requisite external actions, try to do the mitzvot for the sake of Hashem, build up our faith in Him and purify our hearts.
2. Try pausing before doing a mitzva and think: "Why am I doing this? Who commanded me to do it?"
3. When it comes to other people, we should focus mainly on their positive actions. Even if we know that their internal motivations are not pure, we can give them a chance to improve by overlooking any seeming hypocrisy.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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² Brachot 28a.

³ See for example Pesachim 50b.