

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Pekudai – “As Hashem had commanded Moshe”

In this week's Parasha of Pekudai we read about the completion of the work of the Mishkan and its all of its associated utensils, including the special clothes of the Kohanim to be worn while working in the Mishkan. When all the work is complete, the Mishkan is assembled, and the glory of Hashem fills it. Bnei Yisrael created a 'home' for Hashem's Shechinah (so to speak) in this world and Hashem allows His Presence to reside in that home.

There is one phrase that is repeated multiple times throughout this Parasha. We read “as Hashem had commanded Moshe”¹ no less than eighteen times. At the conclusion of every passage that describes a component of the work, the Torah testifies that the work was done precisely “as Hashem had commanded Moshe”. The fact that this phrase is repeated so many times suggests that it is a very significant phrase with important lessons for us.

Contrasting the Mishkan to the Golden Calf

The Gemara² teaches us a general rule that is not so well-known. Whenever Hashem prohibits an item to us, He also permits to us a similar item or He provides an exception to the prohibition. The Gemara provides us with numerous examples, including:

- it is forbidden to consume blood, however we are allowed to consume liver, which is filled with blood and retains the taste.
- It is forbidden to eat chailev (forbidden fat) of a domesticated animal,³ but it is permitted to eat chailev of an undomesticated animal which has the same flavour.
- It is prohibited to eat pig, but it is permitted to eat the brain of the 'shibuta' fish which has a similar taste.
- It is forbidden to marry the wife of one's brother, but it is permitted to do so if he dies childless.
- It is forbidden to eat meat cooked in milk, but it is permitted to eat the udder of a cow which tastes like meat cooked in milk⁴.

This principle applies throughout halacha. For example, we all know that jealousy is forbidden, it is even one of the Aseret Hadibrot. But there is a form of jealousy that is permitted. The jealousy of Torah scholars is not only permitted, it is actually encouraged, as it leads to increased Torah learning.

Another prohibition included in the Aseret Hadibrot is that we must not make a graven image.⁵ (Remarkably, only 40 days after receiving this mitzvah, Bnei Yisrael were guilty of making the golden calf.) But according to our general rule, there must be a case where it is permitted. Where do we see that Hashem allows us to create a graven image?⁶ The answer is in last week's Parasha – the cherubs that were fashioned above the Aron.

Why were there cherubs different to the golden calf? They were both made of gold, and they were both graven images.

¹ The phrase actually appears in two slightly different forms in the Parasha, but both forms refer to the same idea, namely that Hashem's commandments were fulfilled precisely.

² Chullin 19b, quoting a discussion between Rav Nachman and his wife Yalta.

³ 'בהמה' is usually translated as a domesticated animal and 'חיה' is usually translated as an undomesticated animal. This translation is actually not entirely accurate but it's good enough for our purposes.

⁴ It is permitted to eat an udder according to Torah law, but it must be prepared in a certain way, and it is not so simple. So please check with your Local Orthodox Rabbi before partaking of udder.

⁵ Shmot, 20:4 (Parashat Yitro).

⁶ This idea was suggested to me by Rabbi Goodhardt.

The Bet Halevi⁷ explains that the golden calf was not created to be worshipped, but rather to replace Moshe as the intermediary between the nation and Hashem when they believed that Moshe had died.⁸ Rather than seeking to replace their relationship with Hashem, they were trying to maintain it. The Bet Halevi argues that this thought process was not entirely wrong, because the Mishkan, which served as an atonement for the sin of the golden calf, actually fulfilled that exact purpose! So why was the golden calf so wrong and the cherubim so right? The answer is found in the pasuk that is repeated throughout our Parasha: “as Hashem had commanded Moshe”. Whereas we were commanded by Hashem to create the cherubs, we were not commanded to create the golden calf. Our job is to do Hashem’s will and follow Hashem’s instructions.

Comparing the Mishkan to the Amidah

We saw that the phrase “as Hashem commanded Moshe” appears exactly eighteen times in our Parasha. In his commentary to the Parasha, the Baal Haturim notes that this reflects the eighteen brachot in the Amidah that we recite three times every day.⁹ What is the connection between the Amidah and the Mishkan? In the absence of the Mishkan/Bet Hamikdash, we now offer our tefillot in place of korbanot.¹⁰ Therefore, it makes sense that there should be parallels between tefillah and the Mishkan.

But we can explain the connection on a deeper level.¹¹

Hashem chose Betzalel as the chief architect and builder of the Mishkan. The Torah testifies that Betzalel was granted Divine talents in every type of craftsmanship.¹² Betzalel must have been chomping at the bit to showcase his talent and creative genius. But he remained faithful to Hashem’s instructions and created everything exactly “as Hashem had commanded Moshe”.

Similarly, when we stand before Hashem to pray, we (hopefully!) are inspired to call out to Hashem with our own words, to describe to Hashem what we are going through and what we need. But we are required instead to read the exact words of the Amidah, the same words every single time. The words of the Amidah were crafted by the Anshei Knesset Hagedolah, which included prophets and great Torah leaders on an unimaginably high level. The words of the Amidah are the best way that we can express our needs to Hashem and they incorporate everything that we could possibly need. Just like Betzalel put aside his creative genius and faithfully followed Hashem’s instructions, so too we should not try to outshine the eloquent words of the Amidah that were crafted for us.

But there is still room for creativity in our Tefillah. We can inject our own words at various parts of the tefillah (such as during the bracha of ‘Shema Koleinu’) and we can also speak to Hashem in our own words at any time we wish, throughout the day. And if we focus closely on the words as we recite them, new meanings will jump out at us. For example, the second bracha of the Amidah praises Hashem, because He “maintains His faith to those that sleep in the dust”. Surely these words refer to the hostages who are still sleeping in the dust in underground tunnels under brutal conditions! How comforting it is to remember that Hashem is keeping his faith with the hostages. How can you not shed a tear when you read this bracha and think about members of our people, our brothers who still remain in Gaza? The third bracha of the Amidah will surely not read the same when you consider this insight.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Remember that whatever we do, we need to consider one overarching and supremely important question: are we acting as “Hashem had commanded Moshe”?
2. Try to focus on the words of the Amidah and contemplate how they are relevant to you and to the Jewish People today.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁷ Shmot 31:13.

⁸ The question as to who exactly was at fault for the golden calf, and whether it was a real case of avodah zara or not, is discussed at length by the commentators, but it is beyond the scope of this article.

⁹ These days we actually have nineteen brachot in the Amidah because one bracha was added due to the needs of the times. But the Amida is still called the “Shemoneh Esreh” which means eighteen.

¹⁰ See Gemara Brachot 26b.

¹¹ This idea was inspired by the chapter on Parashat Pekudai in the “Short Vort”, by Rabbi Moshe Kormornick.

¹² Shmot 31:3.