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בס"ד

Parashat Vayakhel Part I

1. Transmitting G-d's Instructions

With reconciliation achieved, Moses assembled the entire community of Israelites (כָּל עֲדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל [Exod. 35:1]) to inform them of G-d's instructions for constructing the Tabernacle and the Sabbath regulations that were attached to them. The word denoting his gathering the people, וַיִּקְהַל (*vayakhel*), recalls the only other verbal usage of this stem in the Book of Exodus, the וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם (*vayikahel* [32:1]) that describes the people gathering upon Aaron, demanding that he construct a religious icon for them, that which turned out to be the golden calf. It appears that the present assembly, convened to provide instructions for constructing the Tabernacle, is to be viewed as introducing the countermeasure to the problem represented by the other; G-d's sanctuary program is the legitimate answer to the people's desire to have a tangible sign of His presence within their midst.

The linkage also reminds the reader of the sad "coincidence" that just when Moses was ready to descend the mountain with the tablets and the instructions for the Tabernacle, the people's patience ran out.

Moses taught these instructions in Sabbath-Tabernacle order, reversing the sequence in which he received them. Commentators explain this as a reflection of the common practice of employing chiasm in citing previously recorded material. In addition, by placing the Sabbath first he gave it prominence, highlighting the principle that its observance overrides Tabernacle construction. G-d taught this detail of law by beginning the Sabbath passage immediately after Tabernacle instructions with the qualifying clause וְאַתָּה, "Nevertheless, you must observe My Sabbaths" (31:13) – important as constructing the Tabernacle is, the Sabbath should not be violated for it.

The contrast between the literary formulation of our Sabbath passage and the corresponding one in *Parashat Ki Tissa* (Exod. 31:12-17) is startling. There, G-d articulates the Sabbath concepts in a remarkably exalted and glorious manner. The presentation included references to the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant and of its permanence, as an indication of the intimacy between Him and Israel and of His sanctification of Israel. From beginning to end the passage exudes a sense of majesty and of G-d's great joy in Israel and the covenant. It was formulated in a poetic manner with a grand chiasm, as well as with covenant-related patterns (see our study on *Parashat Ki Tissa Part III: Regarding the Sabbath*). It closed with a description of the Sabbath as a commemoration of G-d's creation of heavens and earth in six days and His resting on the seventh day. The radiance of the Sabbath shone through.

Here, Moses is strictly business, sparing with words: The Sabbath is a day of holiness, work is prohibited, violators are subject to the death penalty and an example of a Sabbath prohibition is specified, namely, kindling of fire.* No mention is made of the everlasting covenant, the sanctification of Israel, the intimacy with G-d, His creative activity and His resting on the seventh day; the sense of exaltedness and splendor that permeate that passage are here absent.

The explanation appears to be that G-d's pronouncement preceded the golden calf transgression (in accordance with the Torah's textual sequence). Following revelation and the lawgiving it was appropriate to be hopeful and optimistic about the relationship between G-d and Israel; accordingly, the formulation of the Sabbath passage reflected this positive disposition and evoked joyous feelings. After the utterly deflating event of the golden calf, however, Moses could not transmit the positive feelings that inhered in the message G-d had given to him.

Although the nation was spared and the covenant officially restored, these developments were in large part the result of G-d's compassion and patience as well as Moses' determined intercession and towering spiritual stature. The nation had not as yet proved itself worthy of complete forgiveness and Moses could not be confident of the outcome.

True, the people had expressed sadness at the consequences of their transgression. When they heard – at an intermediate stage of reconciliation – that G-d would not directly accompany them on their journey, they mourned and would not don their finery (33:4-6). They expressed respect for Moses by standing while he walked to the Tent of Meeting outside the camp and demonstrated their commitment to G-d by bowing toward the cloud that descended upon it (vv. 8-9). However, those indications were not commensurate with the magnitude of the transgression.

In his inability to speak with jubilation and optimism Moses was apparently following G-d's lead. In the intermediate stage of reconciliation, G-d had informed Israel, “and now remove [or “leave off”] your finery from upon you and I will [later] know what to do with you” (v. 5). This appears to imply a lack of joy and confidence in them and deferment of His final decision as to what to do with them. Until they would prove themselves, G-d's original intentions concerning them were put on hold and His delight in them was necessarily suspended, awaiting more substantial evidence from them.

G-d's disposition toward Israel seems to have become more positive in the latter portion of chapter 33 and chapter 34. Nevertheless, Moses seems to have remained unconvinced. We will soon see that Moses' subdued manner of transmitting G-d's Sabbath instructions applied to all the Tabernacle instructions he transmitted until completion of the project, when Israel proved itself repentant.

After mentioning the prohibition of constructive labor (מְלָאכָה) on the Sabbath, Moses singles out the kindling of fire as a prohibited action on this day. In peshat**, some commentators suggested that the reason fire was specifically mentioned was because it was not itself part of the work of Tabernacle construction and might not have been deemed prohibited. Others take the opposite approach. Fire was selected because it was so

extensively required in all aspects of Tabernacle construction. Moreover, the ancient world had recognized fire as the most potent of forces that man brought under his control. It was employed to bring about many valuable physical and chemical transformations that enriched man's life and enabled the technological advance of civilization. Thus, fire served as the fundamental symbol of the productive labor that was prohibited on the Sabbath .***

2. Repetitions and Variances

G-d's instructions for Tabernacle construction are, for the most part, repeated in detail either in the account of Moses' transmission of instructions or in the narration of their fulfillment. This is not surprising. Such repetition was a popular literary style in ancient Near Eastern societies. Indeed, in several cases, when reporting of a temple's construction, the instructional details were repeated verbatim in the description of the fulfillment. The Torah may have employed the literary style of the times, consistent with its adoption of the contemporary outward form in many aspects of the Tabernacle enterprise itself, with modifications when necessary.

In any event, the repetitions do provide significant benefits. They transmit a sense of the importance attributed to the project and to each facet thereof, and emphasize the meticulous attention that is to be devoted to each detail. They signal love for the project and joy in relishing each particular. A sense of affection and devotion is nurtured in the audience.

However, variations do exist between G-d's articulation of instructions on the one hand, and the manner in which Moses presented them and/or how they were recorded in the fulfillment on the other hand. We will address some of the more obvious and prominent ones.

G-d's instructions for construction began with the furnishings that would be placed in the Holy of Holies, starting with the ark, followed by the other furnishings. Then came instructions for the tent. Moses, however, addressed the tent before the furnishings. This is not a case of a standard chiasm since in G-d's formulation there are other construction instructions after the tent. It seems probable that this variation reflects a difference in perspective. G-d is

concerned with the meaning and goals of the Tabernacle, first and foremost its linkage with the covenant. Accordingly, He presented the instructions from an ideological point of view; He began with the holiest items, specifically the ark, the repository of the tablets that represented the covenant, followed by the other articles in the Holy of Holies. It is they that more particularly symbolize the sublime objectives of the Tabernacle enterprise. Moses, on the other hand, had to be concerned with the practical matter of construction. From that vantage point, the usual practice is to first erect the “home” into which the furnishings would be placed.

In informing Israel of the particular items to be constructed, Moses omitted the cherubim. Following the sequence of G-d’s instructions for accoutrements, these should have been mentioned after the ark and the ark covering (35:12). In the construction phase, Bezalel – the chief artisan – did fashion the cherubim and did so in the appropriate order, after the ark and the ark covering (37:7-9) and precisely in accordance with G-d’s instructions to Moses. Obviously, Moses informed Bezalel of this requirement and its details but chose not to mention it to the public at large.

The explanation may be that after Israel’s debacle with the golden calf, Moses thought it best not to bring up the matter of a three-dimensional likeness of created creatures that were to serve as a pedestal for the Deity or for His throne. Many Israelites might have become confused, given that the cherubim have some similarity in purpose to the golden calf, in that the calf was also probably, at least in the first phase, designed to be a pedestal for the Deity (see our study *The Golden Calf*).

Of course the fact that the cherubim were prescribed by G-d makes all the difference. And He instructed that they should be in the Holy of Holies, emerging from the *kaporet* that is upon the ark, thus possessing unique, covenantal symbolism. In this manner their meaning could not ultimately be misconstrued. But Moses may have feared that some people may not readily appreciate these distinctions and thus decided to omit public recitation of their instructions.

G-d’s instructions are replete with assertions of the lofty purposes of the Tabernacle as well as of some of its furnishings and priestly vestments. These

expressions exuded warmth and positive feeling and manifested confidence in the people completing the project properly. Specifically, upon concluding the list of required materials, He declared the Tabernacle’s purpose to be that He will abide in the midst of the nation (25:8). With the instructions for the ark He stated that He would meet with Moses and speak to him above the ark covering, imparting to him that which He wished to instruct Israel (v. 22). Toward the conclusion of the instructional section of major furnishings, He articulated a comprehensive statement of purpose: He will meet with Israel’s leaders in the Tent of Meeting, sanctify it, dwell amidst the people and be their G-d. He closed with the verse: “And they shall know that I am Hashem their G-d who brought them forth from the land of Egypt to abide in their midst, I am Hashem their G-d” (29:42b-46), thus linking the Tabernacle with the opening of the Decalogue and the covenant. These expressions imply that G-d was looking forward to the closer relationship with Israel and expected it to come about.

In teaching Hashem’s instructions, however, Moses did not cite a single one of the exalted objectives or indications of confidence in the people completing the project properly. Neither does the narration of the construction of furnishings mention any of them. Surprisingly, the goal of Hashem’s abiding in the Tabernacle is not attested even once in these subsections! It only appears again in the several last verses of Exodus that follow completion of the Tabernacle, in the context of it having become a successful reality, indicating that the Israelites had made sincere repentance. Remarkably, at the beginning of Moses’ talk to the people, in calling upon them to donate the necessary materials, he does not even explicitly state that the purpose of the materials is for constructing a sanctuary; he merely states that the craftsmen “shall do all that Hashem commanded” (35:10).

Of course, the people knew what the construction project to which they were donating material was about. It is even probable that they expected a sanctuary to be erected as an embodiment of the covenantal relationship recently established with G-d, especially after they had received the tablets. It was the well-established practice of other nations in the region to have a sanctuary. In any event, they surely garnered information concerning construction of the

Tabernacle from Moses' "unofficial" statements and through representatives, but the omissions in his statements quoted in the Torah are striking. Subsequently, Moses' mention of the Tabernacle is in a matter-of-fact manner, merely as a reference to the tent and the heading of tent materials and particulars to be constructed (see 35:11, 15, 18). Such consistent depiction is obviously not happenstance but should be assumed to reflect Moses' mode of transmission, which sheds light on his disposition and perhaps on his strategy in dealing with the Israelites.

As we explained concerning Sabbath instructions, despite G-d's agreement to renew the covenant after the golden calf episode, since the people had not yet proven their worthiness, Moses could not take G-d's good will and favor for granted. Until he saw the sincere and complete repentance of the Israelites, Moses could not fully quote Hashem's pretransgression statements regarding the Sabbath and Tabernacle, plentiful and significant as they were. If Israel was truly committed to the covenant and proceeded with the Tabernacle project "as Hashem had commanded," the project would succeed and Hashem would abide among the nation. Premature confidence might transmit the wrong message to the Israelites; until the Tabernacle's successful completion Moses could not convey G-d's original optimism, which He expressed during the time period prior to the golden calf.

Aside from Moses' statements in the transmission of instructions, the Torah narrative itself concerning construction of the Tabernacle appears to have a similar "wait and see" attitude. Perhaps this textual feature resulted from Moses' disposition at that time, but it may very well be understood to reflect the Torah's position itself, stemming from G-d's disposition of awaiting proof of Israel's faithfulness.

One wonders if the people's immediate and overwhelmingly enthusiastic response to Moses' instructions was influenced by this realistic and "you must prove your commitment" disposition.

Endnotes

* It should be noted that in the Torah's transcription of G-d's instructions to Moses in chapter 31, the specific prohibition of fire was not mentioned. What Moses teaches in G-d's name in our context was undoubtedly taught to him by G-d. Obviously, what was written in chapter 31 of G-d's teaching to Moses is only a fraction of the whole, the balance constituting a part of what was later termed the Oral Torah. (See our study on *Parashat Shemini Part II*.)

** In the midrash-halakhah sphere, the sages disputed this matter. Some viewed the singling out of fire as an indication that it was to be treated as its own negative prohibition, without the full severity that applied to the other categories of prohibited work referred to in general in the preceding verse. Others viewed the separation of fire from the rest as a way to teach that the transgression of any single category of prohibited work would carry the full brunt of consequences. The adjacency of the Sabbath laws to the instructions for Tabernacle construction was seen as defining the categories of work prohibited on the Sabbath. The thirty-nine categories of work required to construct the Tabernacle were the categories prohibited on Sabbath (see *m. Sabb. 7:2*).

*** The formulation of the prohibition concerning fire, *לֹא תִבְעֲרוּ אֵשׁ...בְּיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת*, literally translates "do not burn fire...on the Sabbath day." This general formulation includes kindling a fire, applying a fire to another item or even increasing the fire by adding fuel to it. All would be "burning" fire. Since the verbal clause of the prohibition refers to one's action on the Sabbath day, it does not apply to allowing a fire that was burning before the onset of the Sabbath to continue to burn in order to receive benefit from its heat and light on the Sabbath.