

Torah From a Mussar Perspective
Parshat Pekudei – Exodus 38:21-40:38
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This week brings us to the end of Exodus. Our portion recounts the conclusion of the work of building the *Mishkan*. By the end of the portion God's *Kavod*/Presence has filled the *Mishkan* and will now guide the Israelites as they continue their journey from Mount Sinai towards the Promised Land. Our portion brings to a conclusion our people's first construction project (not counting any work done as slaves in Egypt.)

I imagine I am not the only one in our community who has had the task of assembling something: a child's toy, a piece of furniture, perhaps something even more ambitious. Indeed, my wife and I recently visited our local Ikea, the Swedish furniture company, to acquire some items for our home. Entering Ikea is always daunting. First, their showrooms are massive. Second, even if you only came looking for one specific item, chances are good you will leave with more than you intended on buying. Then comes the kicker – much of what they sell needs to be assembled, often with only simple pictures to guide you.

I can just picture Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness. They have gathered all the materials for the *Mishkan*, which are spread out on the ground before them. I can almost hear someone asking: Are we sure we have the right number of bolts? What about those small wooden dowels? Do we have the ones we need. Wait, are those crimson yarns the right shade of crimson? "Some assembly required" have long been words that ratchet up my angst, and yes it's truly minor angst in the grand scheme of things.

I was reminded of these experiences while studying a teaching of Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel,¹ the Alter of Slabodka in *Ohr HaTzafun* on a verse in this week's portion. The Alter helped me notice something I had never focused on before. Think back over recent portions. God has presented Moses with the lists of materials and instructions for the building of the *Mishkan*. We have been taught on more than one occasion, that God commands Moses to give the sacred tasks to Bezalel, Oholiab and all whom God has blessed with *Chochmat lev*, heart wisdom. Yet, as we read of the final steps in the construction, in Exodus 40:18 we read the following:

וַיִּקַּם מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הַמִּשְׁכָּן וַיִּתֵּן אֶת-אֲדָנָיו וַיִּשֶׂם אֶת-קַרְשָׁיו
וַיִּתֵּן אֶת-בְּרִיתָיו וַיִּקַּם אֶת-עַמֻּדָיו:

Moses set up the Tabernacle, placing its sockets, setting up its planks, inserting its bars, and erecting its posts.

¹ Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel (1849-1927) was an influential Lithuanian Jewish leader of Orthodox Judaism in Eastern Europe and founder of the Slabodka yeshiva. At a young age, he went to study at the Kelm Talmud Torah under Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, "the Alter of Kelm." Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel is also known by the Yiddish appellation *der Alter* ("the Elder") and as the Alter of Slabodka.

Wait a minute! God instructs Moses to task Bezalel, Oholiab and the other skilled artisans with the work. And then, as we reach the climax of the task, we now read that Moses himself is actually doing the construction. What is going on?

In *Ohr HaTzafun*, the Alter reminds us that God states that, “Moses . . . is trusted throughout My household.” (Numbers 12:7) He bolsters this, explaining that,

Moses has certainly risen in the ranks of *Emunah*/Faith over the course of all the events of Egypt and the Red Sea, together with all the children of Israel many times over. [Indeed], our Sages said of him, that he was equal to sixty-thousand of [the children of] Israel.²

Commenting further on Moses’ worthiness in the eyes of the Holy One, the Alter states,

[Moses] was raised up from the earth [as it were], to the very edge of heaven. He ascended to the firmament and defeated the angels who testified against him [and his worthiness for the task as a mere human being.] The angels said to the Holy One: "Let your glory be established in the heavens," [Psalm 8:2].

Yet, Moses was the one who was deemed worthy to receive the Torah from God and bring it down to earth.³

We know from the Rabbis depictions of debates between God and the angels that there was contention over whether human beings should be created. The angels are depicted as arguing against God’s intention to create humans, while God is firm in stating that it is for humanity that God has created this world. It becomes our task, as partners with God, to sustain and enhance it. Having Moses, as God’s most trustworthy partner complete the work of building the Sanctuary to symbolize God’s Presence in the midst of the people, is a further statement of God’s *Bitachon*/Trust in Moses!

The Alter continues,

In the building of the Tabernacle, Moses was the only one found worthy to erect it. Our Sages teach, “All the *chochamim*⁴ were unable to erect the Tabernacle until Moses came and erected it.⁵

² *Ohr HaTzafun, Bereshit, 34:17*

³ Ibid.

⁴ Likely a reference to *chochmei lev* (artisans imbued with wisdom from God) who, together with Bezalel and Oholiab, had been tasked with the work.

⁵ Ibid.

The Alter points us to *Midrash Tanchuma*⁶ in which the Rabbis depict Bezalel, Oholiab and the other artisans sitting by as they wait for the *Shechinah*⁷ to descend upon and hover over the *Mishkan*.⁸ In the *Midrash*, the Sages also ask: “Why were they [Bezalel, Oholiab, and the *chochmei lev*] unable to erect it? Because of the fact that Moses was distressed at not having participated in the construction of the Tabernacle.”⁹

The Alter refers to the next passage:

It was said to [Moses]: “Did you not tell us to do such-and-such?” He replied: “Yes, indeed.” So, they pointed to everything that had been done. They said: “If that is so, why does it not stand? We tried to have Bezalel, Oholiab, and the wise-hearted erect it, but they were unable to do so.”

Moses was troubled by all this until the Holy One told him: Moses, because you were unhappy over the fact that you did not share in the work of the building of the Tabernacle, these wise people are not able to erect it. Now Israel will know that if you do not erect it, it will never be set up.¹⁰

Finally, the Alter extends the teaching to what will occur now that the Tabernacle has been erected. We read in Exodus 40:33-34 – “When Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of THE ETERNAL ONE filled the Tabernacle.” Furthermore, as the next verse makes clear, “Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of THE ETERNAL ONE filled the Tabernacle.” The Alter adds,

After the Tabernacle was erected and no one could enter it because "the glory of THE ETERNAL ONE filled [it]," Moses was the only one whom God called to enter the Tent of Meeting, as it is written: "And THE ETERNAL ONE called to Moses" (Leviticus 1) and Moses would enter and exit the Tent of Meeting.¹¹

We know, from numerous places in our tradition, that we are not expected to be Moses, nor any of the other great figures of our long history. Yet, each of us is called to strive towards the holiness and *gadlut/greatness* that is ours alone to attain. That is why we stay on the *Mussar* path, so that we can live up to our greatest potential. As Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe teaches,

There was never a person like you, nor will there ever be a person like you throughout history. I – with my special character strengths, my particular parents, born at a specific time period, and in a certain environment . . . there is a unique challenge that is placed upon me . . . the entire world is waiting for me to

⁶ *Midrash Tanhuma, Pekudei* 11

⁷ God's In-Dwelling Presence

⁸ *Midrash Tanhuma, Pekudei* 11:5

⁹ *Ibid*, 11:6

¹⁰ *Ohr HaTzafun, Bereshit*, 34:17

¹¹ *Ibid*.

actualize that which is incumbent upon me. For my role cannot be exchanged with anyone else in the world!¹²

FOR FOCUS:

- From a *middah* perspective, what do you think of as your greatest strength?
- How can you better use this strength to reach your potential?
- We are taught that each of our homes is a *Mikdash m'at*, a small sanctuary, as a reflection of the *Mishkan* and later, the Temple in Jerusalem. How might you use your strengths to build your *Mikdash m'at*?

¹² Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Shur*, volume 1