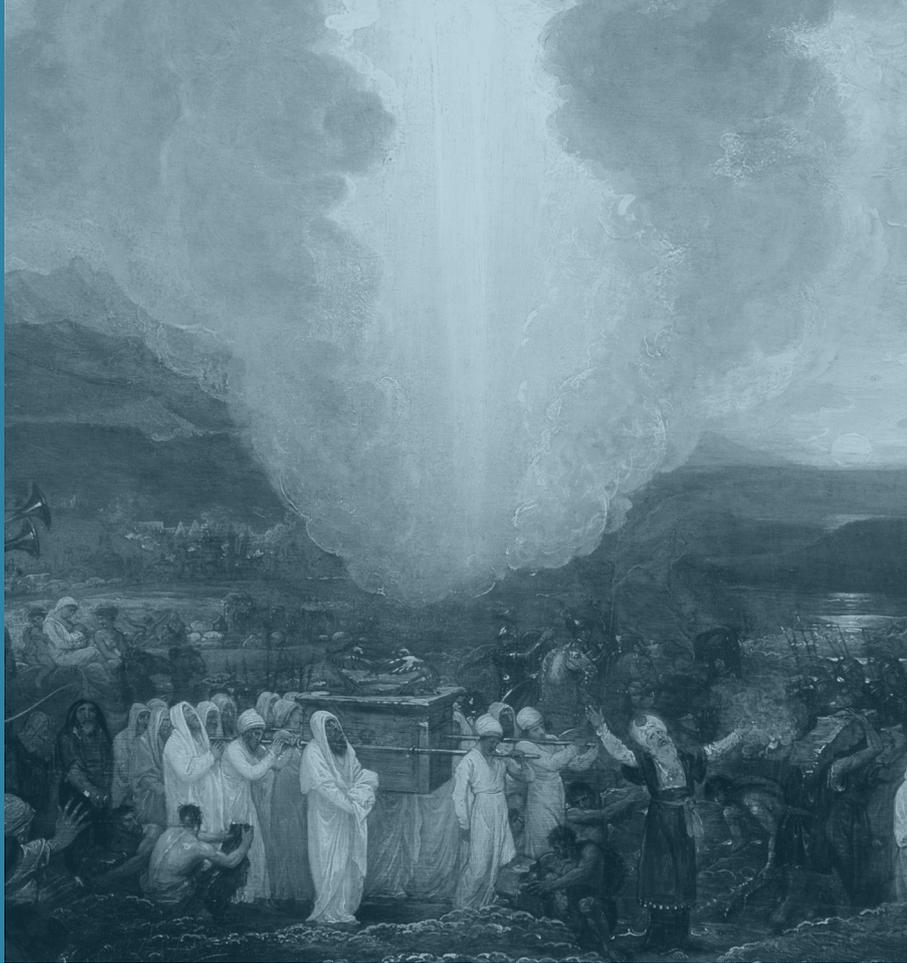


No Generosity Means No Community

Parashat Veyakhel-Pekudei



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Our weekly reading is called Parashat Veyakhel-Pekudei; it is a double Torah portion. According to the Hebrew calendar, an additional month is added every leap year, the month of “Adar II”.

This month is added so that Passover will always fall during the month of spring, Rosh Hashanah will always occur during the right time of the year, and the the first rain will be around the time of Sukkot. This additional month is added in order to preserve the order of the feasts and holidays throughout the year.

So if an additional month is added, from where will we bring the additional parashot to read during the additional Sabbath days of this month? For this purpose, we have combined parashot like Vayakhel-Pekudei, Behar-Bechukotai, and Tazria-Metzora. Usually we read each one as a single parasha, however, in a leap year, when there are four extra Sabbaths, we read them separately.

A Quick Review of Exodus

This parasha is the final portion of the book of Exodus, because of this I will summarize the book and the long path that Israel took. In the beginning of Exodus, an extended family went down to Egypt due to the harsh conditions of drought and famine. Eventually, this family grows and becomes a great nation. To remind you, the people of Israel were in Egypt for 400 years. In the beginning of the book we met Moses, we fled with him to Midian, and we witnessed God's appearance in the burning bush.

Later on, we saw the mighty hand of God, how He brought Israel out of Egypt mightily with the ten severe plagues – ending with the parting of the Red Sea and the passing of an entire nation through it.

The Book of Exodus can not be summed up without the mention of the revelation at Mount Sinai and the giving of the tablets of the covenant. After the giving of the Torah, the collection of contributions for building the Tabernacle began. We also have the unfortunate incident of the Golden Calf. After the Golden Calf, we reach the end of Exodus, which is our parasha. After summarizing this series of events, we can see a collection of great, wonderful, and amazing stories. After such stories, it's a bit difficult to read this week's relatively mundane Torah portion.

Once again, we're discussing the materials for the Tabernacle, the labor, and the contributions. At the end of all the tedious detailed work, God came and dwelt in His glory amongst the people of Israel in the Tabernacle that the people had built, sculpted, sewed, and contributed towards.

The long, hard, and meticulous path that they took entitled us to the Divine Presence among us.

The Power of Generosity

The Book of Exodus ends in a powerful way:

“Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.” – Exodus 40:34,35 [NIV]

What was the Tabernacle in which God dwelt made from? As we read a few

weeks ago in Parashat Terumah:

“Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give.”
– Exodus 25:2 [NIV]

This generosity is also mentioned in this parasha (Exodus 35:5).

The most precious thing that was given for the construction of the Tabernacle was not gold nor expensive stones, the most valuable aspect of it was the heart of man. Generosity was the most essential part and it is what truly built the Tabernacle of God.

Did the people of Israel actually build the Tabernacle out of their own generosity? Yes, in fact, this parasha teaches us that the people of Israel gave so much towards the project that Moses had to forcefully stop the giving:

“...and [the skilled workers] said to Moses, ‘The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the Lord commanded to be done.’ Then Moses gave an order and they sent this word throughout the camp: ‘No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary.’ And so the people were restrained from bringing more...” – Exodus 36:5,6 [NIV] (amended)

Giving to the community is one of the cornerstones of human society, it is an act of taking responsibility and leading towards change. Our contribution connects us to each other and to God.

The Consequences of False Appearances

I would like to turn to the incident of the donation of Ananias' estate in the New Testament:

“Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it

at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, 'Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.' When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, 'Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?' 'Yes,' she said, 'that is the price.' Peter said to her, 'How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.' At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.'" – Acts 5:1-10 [NIV]

This is a very challenging story to comprehend. Even before it started, it was not made clear whether or not contribution was mandatory. Did the early believers have to sell their property and share everything? What sin had been committed in this instance?

It's my understanding that contribution was not mandatory, it was optional. As a result, there are two main explanations for Ananias' sin.

It could have been a sin of disbelief and doubt, that he did not trust God to provide for him and his family. In other words, he gave up his property, but he was afraid he would be in financial need, so he kept a portion for himself just in case.

Perhaps it could be that he took for himself credit, prestige, and honor that were not his. Meaning that Ananias decided to donate his property, just as the people of Israel gave out of their own free will for the building of the Tabernacle. Ananias could have given any amount he wanted, as we can see

from Peter's own words:

“Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal?” – Acts 5:4a [NIV]

That is to say, Ananias could have given much or little, according to the calling of his heart and his own desire to contribute.

The problem started when he kept some of the money for himself and lied about it as a result. It was as if he sold all of his estate and gave everything, all he had, to the Messianic community. The real problem here is one of false appearances. He took the credit for himself, more honor than he deserved, he tried to appear in everyone's eyes as a great saint who sold all his property for the common good. When in fact, he secretly kept some for himself.

This incident should raise a red flag for us and cause us to think about our own actions at work, at home, or within our community. We must be careful not to take for ourselves more credit than we actually deserve. For instance, our manager at work praises us for some accomplishment that we only played a small part in – we must be careful not to take honor that we do not deserve or that we only partially deserve. Especially if we spend most of the day browsing the web and using office equipment for our personal needs.

As another example, let's say I decided to stay at home to take care of my small children and I put them in front of the TV in their room, while I go off and watch TV in another room. A few minutes before my wife gets home, I take them outside and play with them, as if I invested hours with my children. Now that my wife gets home, it's her turn to take care of the kids, because I was a good father and played with them earlier and now I'm tired; this is an instance of false appearances as well as a lying.

We are also guilty of presenting false appearances within the community, and when this happens, it causes harm in a number of ways. On one hand, it's the honor that we deceitfully take from our brothers and sisters in the community. Even if the honor is deserved, receiving it from man comes at the expense of receiving it from God, at the price of a blessing from God in our lives.

If we put up false appearances or try to appear more righteous than we really are, we are setting a high standard. However, when the truth comes out, and it always does, the fake high standard is broken, and this may harm

many others in the process.

Trust Begins With the Smallest Things

We must be able to trust one another, and when it turns out we were lied to, it immediately leads to brokenness, pain, insecurity, and even despair.

Remember, trust is necessary not just with important matters, in fact it must begin with the smallest things first. If we cannot be trusted in the small things, at work, in the home, or with family, we cannot be trusted by God.

For example, someone pretends that he can heal others and people follow that person. But when it turns out that it's just an illusion, innocent people get hurt and something inside of them gets broken.

Another example can be seen with people who claim that they're prophets who hear from God. Innocent people follow them, and they don't understand why they're not getting a revelation from God. These desperate individuals might try fasting and praying for hours, trying with all their might to hear directly from the Almighty.

However, to their dismay, it turns out in the end that these people who claimed to be prophets never truly were.

In this instance, I believe that Peter is giving a warning to believers: if Ananias and Sapphira put up false appearances, they are actually lying to the Holy Spirit, to the Lord, and to the community. They cannot be trusted and should not be part of the community. We see in this story an extreme case of God ousting the impostors from the community by using death as the punishment.

Should Your Foot be on the Gas Pedal or on the Brakes?

My favorite part of this parasha and favorite part of the Torah is the verse that closes and seals the Book of Exodus:

“So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.” – Exodus 40:38 [NIV]

I really love this verse because it taught me about the importance of balance in life.

Everything in life is based on pressing the gas pedal and pressing on the brakes.

When we burn with enthusiasm, we let out a lot of energy and our engine may catch fire – we should calm down. But when we're sleepy and running at half capacity, we should drink a strong cup of coffee and wake up. When we're stretched to the limit, we needed to loosen up a bit, but if we're too loose, it's hard for us to snap back into action and do what is required of us. When we're too happy and in the clouds, our warning lights don't work, so we should land back on Earth. However, if we sink into depression, we need to rise up a bit, we need to strive to transcend.

The Israelites were accompanied by a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire, fire gives light and heat in the cold, dark night of the desert. The pillar of cloud however, gives shade, hiding the bright desert sun. Life is a series of contradictions; the point is to develop a heightened sense in order to know when to press on the brakes and when to press on the gas pedal.

I also relate this to our spiritual lives – we cannot be so connected with the spiritual side, so as to neglect the physical side. It's not healthy to neglect your life. On the other hand, we cannot neglect the spiritual side in caring for this world.

In Conclusion

The grandiose ending of the Book of Exodus tells of God descending to dwell in a house that the people of Israel built for Him. God Almighty, Creator of everything, coming to dwell with humans.

This ending teaches me, that after the hard and meticulous work, when we work from our hearts, God comes and dwells amongst us. Even in the congregation, we must attend to the smallest details, beginning with the chairs, the kitchen utensils, general cleaning, greeting one another, and not to mention mutual respect and good manners. If we attend to the small and the big things – God will dwell among us.

Be strengthened and encouraged, next week we will begin the Book of Leviticus.

**The Teachings of
Messiah Yeshua
*in a Jewish Context***

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