

Parshat Tetzaveh: If You Build It, They Will Come: Losing, Persevering, and Rebuilding Yael Smooha

I spent the last week in Jerusalem studying at Nishmat with my daughter Sima. In one class, her teacher shared with us an elegant analysis of the parshiot dealing with the *mishkan*. Using verses from the text, Rav Shai Neve drew a "menorah"-like image of the latter part of the book of Shmot, spanning chapters 24 to 40. In the middle, the "shamash", if you will, was the event of *Chet ha'egel*, the sin of the golden calf. On the right side was the *mishkan* narrative before the sin, what he called Mishkan I. On the left side were verses from the *mishkan* narrative after the sin, what he called Mishkan II.

There is a notable symmetry between the two narratives. In Mishkan I, God rests his presence on Mount Sinai. Then the instructions are given to construct a *mishkan* in order for God to dwell in the midst of the people. Then, the mitzvah of Shabbat is mentioned. Last, the first set of tablets, written by God, are given to Moshe.

At this point the book of Shmot tells the story of the sin of the Golden Calf, in which the Jewish people worship a graven image while they wait for Moshe to return from his private study session with God on Mount Sinai.

In Mishkan II, which begins after the account of the Golden Calf, the order is reversed. First, God instructs Moshe to carve the second set of *luchot* now that the first ones are broken from the aftermath of the Golden Calf. Next, Shabbat. Then, instructions are given for the construction of the *mishkan's* parts. Finally, the *mishkan* is constructed and God rests His presence in the *mishkan*.

Mishkan I begins with God's presence and ends with the divine tablets of stone. Mishkan II begins with a second set of tablets - the man made edition - and ends with God's bringing God's presence in the *mishkan*.

Rav Shai approached the two narratives as two ways to go about relationships. As an example, when it comes to marriage, some believe in starting with love (symbolized by God's presence) and building upon that love, just like Mishkan I. Others believe in building a home conducive to love, and eventually the love will happen, as in Mishkan II.

I'd like to think of these two narratives as one continuous cycle, rather than two possible pathways. Every creative cycle begins with a flash of inspiration, just like God's revelation on Mount Sinai. A free gift. Then come the instructions, the rules, just like Mishkan I, in which the instructions that follow are the many details involved in the construction of the *mishkan*. These represent the nitty gritty day-in, day-out kind of work needed to nurture the project. Rabbi Akiva Tatz discusses this dynamic in his book *Living Inspired*.

In every creative project, bumps along the road are inevitable, just like the sin of the golden calf and the precious God-given tablets that are broken in that event. It's at this juncture in every creative process where our resolve is put to the test: do we persevere? Or do we call it quits? How do we respond when plan A falls through? There is always loss. Yet just as a seed needs to break and decompose in order to take root, and ultimately bear fruit, loss and decomposition are inherent in every rebirth. (This idea of loss as a necessary element in organizational

change is one that we have been studying at Yeshivat Maharat in our Adaptive Leadership class with Maya Bernstein.)

This is where Mishkan II comes in. God instructs Moshe to carve the second set of tablets, now that the first set is broken. This verse in particular is one which my teacher, Dr. Erin Leib Smokler, brings to our attention in our Pastoral Torah classes when discussing rebuilding in life cycle events. There have been moments in my life when the irrevocable loss of the “first tablets” - so perfect, Godly, pristine - made it hard for me to see value in anything less than perfect. We need this instruction to remind us that God expects imperfection, and it is our responsibility to brush ourselves off and start Plan B rather than get paralyzed with the loss of Plan A.

Maybe that's why the very next step is Shabbat. The spiritual work of Shabbat is to accept what is, and what isn't. To be at peace with what is, no matter how incomplete it seems. Then we can move on to the next step, the instructions once again. The work. After months of collaborative labor, painstaking details, only then did “the cloud encompassed the Tent of Meeting and God's glory filled the *mishkan*” (Shmot 40:33)

But the process does not stop there. Just like Mishkan I, God's presence, the “good times” if you will, is what feeds the cycle once again.

We see this in the Purim story. There is an idea that in the Megila, which never mentions God explicitly, each reference to the king is in some way an allusion to the King of kings, or God. When Mordechai learns of Haman's plot to destroy the Jewish people, Esther is at first too stuck on the royal protocol, citing the law that no person may appear before the king without an appointment. She reminds Mordechai of the capital punishment that ensues unless the king, by extending his scepter, absolves such a person of this punishment.

Yet just as God instructs Moshe to carve the second set of tablets, Mordechai pushes Esther to challenge the status quo, to push her to try imperfect Plan B, with all of its inherent risks. When she hears Mordechai's message, she instructs the Jewish people to fast and pray on her behalf. Hard, hard, work with no guarantee of success, just like the building of the *mishkan* in the second narrative. Ultimately, King Achashverosh extends his scepter which ultimately saves her from certain death, just as God, *le'havdil*, ultimately rests God's presence upon the *mishkan* that the Jewish people built after the darkness of the Sin of Golden Calf.

May God give us the fortitude to accept our broken tablets, rewrite our own new story, stretch ourselves to persevere, so that we can ultimately rebuild and receive the presence of God in our lives.



Born in Haifa and raised in Allentown, Pennsylvania in a Hebrew speaking home, Yael Smoocha grew up enchanted by the stories of the Torah. Yael studied at Breuers and then at Teachers College, Columbia University, ultimately teaching public school and then at Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan and of Westchester. She cares deeply about the integration of arts and education. Yael currently heads the Jspace Hebrew School at Hebrew Institute of Riverdale - the Bayit. Yael currently lives with her family in Teaneck, NJ.