

Parshat Tzav: Petach HaOhel: Doorways and Opportunities Atara Lindenbaum

Urban planners, designers, and architects pay special attention to thresholds in public spaces. Social encounters in thresholds or doorways are unique because they force people into closer contact with one another, thereby forcing individuals to take notice of the space and people around them. It is not uncommon to find people lingering in doorways, caught up in conversation with one another, almost unsure if they are ready to transition from one space to another.

At the end of Parshat Tzav, Aaron and his sons are commanded to linger at the threshold of the Ohel Moed for seven days:

"You shall not go outside the entrance of the Tent of the Meeting for seven days, until the day that your ordination is completed, for your ordination will require seven days.... You shall remain at the entrance of the Tent of meeting day and night for seven days..." (Leviticus 8: 33-35)

וּמִפֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֹא תֵצֵאוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים עַד יוֹם מְלֹאת יְמֵי מְלֹאֲיֵכֶם כִּי שִׁבְעַת יָמִים יִמְלֵא אֶת־יְדֵיכֶם: ... פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד תֵּשְׁבוּ יוֹמָם וּלְיָלָה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וּשְׁמֵרְתֶּם אֶת־מִשְׁמֶרֶת יְקֹקֶץ וְלֹא תָמוּתוּ כִּי־כֵן צִוִּיתִי: (ויקרא ח:לג-לה)

These seven days completed the process of inauguration into the Priesthood for Aaron and his sons. Their transformation into Priests was not dependent solely on ritual actions in the Temple, but also required a time period of one week to mark this monumental shift in their existence within the Jewish nation.

These seven days were a liminal moment for Aaron and his sons in which they could reflect on their previous lives as regular members of *Shevet Levi* and look forward to their futures serving as *Kohanim* in the *Mishkan*. The word *liminal* comes from the word in Latin "limen," which translates as a threshold, or a physical entryway or doorway to a building or space. The entryway to the Ohel Moed was an entryway, a place of transition between the camp of Bnei Yisrael and the Mishkan, a space off limits to most of Bnei Yisrael except for the Kohanim. The seven days of liminality, therefore, was compounded by an intense physical component, as Aaron and his sons could not leave the entryway of the *Ohel Moed*, a liminal space, for seven days and seven nights.

The midrash (Brisheet Rabbati 18:1) connects the *Kohanim's* seven days in *Petach HaOhel* to the entryway to Avraham's tent, a place where Avraham sat in order to welcome guests. Avraham, after his *brit milah*, situates himself in *Petach haOhel*, in the entryway to his own tent, and it is there that God appears to Avraham in the form of the three men.

And the Lord appeared to him in Elonei Mamre, he was sitting at the entrance to the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. And he saw and he ran to greet them from the entrance of the tent, bowing to the ground. (Genesis 18:1-2)

(א) וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְקֹקֶץ בְּאַלְנֵי מַמְרֵה וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל כָּחֹם הַיּוֹם:
(ב) וַיֵּשֶׁא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו וַיֵּרָא וַיָּרָץ לִקְרֹאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָה: (בראשית פרק יח)

The midrash writes:

You made yourself uncomfortable and sat in the entrance to the tent, I will bring forth from you Priests anointed with oil who will sit in the entryway to the tent, as it says, And in the entryway to the tent of Meeting you shall sit.

"והוא יושב פתח האהל. א"ל אתה נצטערת וישבת פתח האהל אני אוציא ממך כהנים משוחים בשמן המשחה ויושבים פתח האהל שנאמר ופתח אהל מועד תשבו (ויקרא ח' ל"ה)."

Avraham is not commanded to sit in the entryway to his tent, but he chooses to do so out of his own desire to see and be seen outside of his tent. The midrash describes that Avraham was in pain, and needed to physically

recuperate from his *Brit Milah*. But to Avraham, the thought of staying in his tent was unacceptable; Avraham's desire to meet the other overwhelmed any form of physical discomfort. It is in this space, the entryway to his tent, that Hashem chose to announce the news of Yitzchak's birth to both Avraham and Sarah. For the midrash, Avraham's personal desire to linger in the entryway to his home provides the backdrop to his future descendants' priestly occupation.

What message do Avraham's actions have for the Kohanim? Rav Moshe Gwertzman, an early 19th century Chassidic Rebbe, writes that Avraham's actions of sitting in *Petach Haohel* symbolize a quintessential attribute of the pious person.

A truly pious person, even after a life of servitude to Hashem, will still consider him or herself as one who can only linger outside the tent of kedushah, one who has barely even started to serve Hashem. It is this way of thinking, to stay on the periphery, that characterizes the Tzaddik.

“שחושב במחשבתו שהוא עדיין בפתח אהל של הקדושה. וכן הוא דרך הצדיקים הגם שעובדים את ה' כל ימיהם עם כל זה נדמה להם בלבם ומחשבתם באמת שעדיין לא התחילו כלום לעבוד את הש"י והם עדיין מחוץ לאהל הקדושה רק עומדים בפתח האהל”

The priesthood, as it is presented in the Torah, is by definition exclusionary. Only Aaron and his family could serve as priests, and even among the family, anyone with a physical blemish was barred from serving in the Temple. However, the job of the priests is to serve in the mikdash on behalf of the Jewish people, who are described as “ממלכת כהנים,” a nation of priests. Aaron and his sons were to linger not in a period of solitude inside the *mikdash*, but in a space where they could see and be seen by all of the Jewish people, in the small space of a threshold of the *Petach Ohel Mo'ed*. Like Avraham, they needed to be at home in the threshold, available to meet other people.

Depending on human activity, the way people interact with a space, an entryway can symbolize to the public that they are welcome, or instead, that they are excluded from a private space. The Talmud recognizes this ephemeral nature of entryways, and in its discussion of the legal category of an entryway as public or private space, concludes that it can be either, dependent on how individuals interact with the entryway:

Others say: Depending on the circumstances, a threshold serves two domains: When the entrance is open, the threshold is subsumed within the house and it is considered to be a private domain like the inside of the house. And when the entrance is locked, the threshold is not subsumed within the house, and it is considered to be a public domain like the outside. (Shabbat 9a)

אחרים אומרים אסקופה משמשת שתי רשויות בזמן שהפתח פתוח כלפנים פתח נעול כלחוץ (שבת ט.)

Aaron and his sons stood in the entryway to the Ohel Moed for seven days, perhaps contemplating how they would operate within that space. For seven days they would see the nation they would serve, and could make pivotal decisions about how to keep the “door” open, allowing the kedushah of the nation and the Mishkan to permeate and flow, one into the other.



Atara Lindenbaum, comes to Maharat after completing a Masters in Urban Planning and Policy from Hunter College. Throughout Atara's time at Hunter, she researched and wrote about religious issues in urban areas, such as eruv and issues of school funding. Atara worked as a planning consultant to various towns throughout the Hudson Valley. She has studied at the Matan Program for Advanced Bible Studies and at the Melton School in Hebrew University. Atara discovered her love of teaching at the Matan Bat Mitzvah Program, Maimonides School in Brookline, MA and Beren Academy in Houston, TX. Atara graduated from Stern College with a BA in History, after learning at both Migdal Oz and Midreshet Lindenbaum. Atara currently lives in Tel Aviv with her husband and three daughters.