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a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Priorities in the Mishkan

PARSHAS PEKUDEI 5776

This week’s *parshah* is the final in the series of *parshiyos* dealing with the construction of the Mishkan. Looking back on the overall unit, we find what seems to be a discrepancy regarding the order of the proceedings.

The main issue involves the two principal aspects involving the Mishkan: the body of the Mishkan itself and the various sacred implements (*Aron Kodesh* [Holy Ark], Menorah, etc.) that went inside. Which of these two entities were to be fashioned first? Based on the arrangement recorded in parshas Terumah, it would seem that the *keilim* (vessels) were granted priority. In that *parshah*, Moshe issued the instructions regarding all the numerous details. There, he first deals with the Aron, the Shulchan (table), the Menorah, etc.; only afterward does he discuss the dimensions and materials of the body of the Mishkan itself, including its boards, coverings, etc.

But in Hashem’s actual command, the order is reversed; as it states: וַיְדַבֵּר ד' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר, רְאֵה, קִרְאתִי בְשֵׁם בְּצִלְאֵל בֶּן-אוּרִי בֶן-חֹרִי לְמַטֵּה יְהוּדָה... וַעֲשׂוּ אֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִךָ, אֵת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְאֵת-הָאָרוֹן... וְאֵת... כָּל-כְּלֵי הָאֹהֶל... – “And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: ‘See, I have called in the name of Betzalel son of Uri son of Chur of the tribe of Yehudah... And they shall fashion all that I have commanded you: **The Tabernacle, the Aron... and all the Tent’s vessels...**” (*Shemos 31:1-7*).

So – which came first: the Mishkan or the *keilim*?

Different Atonement Agendas

This issue is addressed by Rashi in the beginning of this week’s *parshah* (*ibid.* 38:22). To resolve the inconsistency, he quotes Chazal’s teaching (*Berachos 55a*), which reveals that a disagreement of sorts took place on this point between Moshe Rabbeinu and Betzalel, the chief architect for the Mishkan’s construction.

The conflicting *pessukim* reflect the difference of opinion advanced by these two figures. What happened was that Moshe felt that the preferred order was to deal first with the *keilim* and only afterward to construct the Mishkan itself. But Betzalel took the opposite tack, advocating a “Mishkan-first” approach. He boosted his side with the following argument: When constructing a house, don’t people first build the structure and only afterward appoint it with furniture and the like? The construction of the Mishkan, he argued, should follow the same pattern.

Actually, there was a lot more to this discussion than meets the eye. R’ Yehonasan Eibschitz (*Tiferes Yehonason*) offers a novel interpretation to this event, revealing the underpinnings of these two approaches.

This, of course, was not a matter of personal interest; rather, it was atoning for sins that was the driving factor. Both understood the formidable atonement power of this endeavor and sought to address thereby the unsettled accounts resulting from certain grave transgressions.

Moshe Rabbeinu was primarily concerned with the lingering effects of the *Cheit Ha'eigel*, the Sin of the Golden Calf. He felt himself partially responsible, as the primary instigators of this deed were the members of the *Eirev Rav*. This was the “mixed multitude” comprised of Egyptians whom Moshe had allowed to join the Jewish people as they exited the land. That is why he prioritized the fashioning of the *keilim*. One key difference between the *keilim* and the Mishkan structure was the usage of gold, which figured prominently in the former but was basically absent from the latter. Thus, he favored dealing first with the *keilim*; to atone for the Golden Calf, he sought to utilize gold for the constructive purpose of the Sanctuary service.

Betzalel, on the other hand, put a premium on the Mishkan, comprised largely of *kesef* (silver). His chief aim was to expiate the sin of *mechiras Yosef*, in which the tribes had sold their brother into slavery for *kesef*. After all, Betzalel was a scion of the House of Yehudah – בְּצַלְאֵל – בֶּן-אוּרִי בֶן-חוּר לְמִטָּה יְהוּדָה – the figure who had played the most significant role in that episode.

A Fitting Receptacle

There is a very different way to understand the essence of this dispute. It could very well be that the opposing positions represent differing overall philosophies in serving Hashem.

By way of introduction, it is worthwhile to cite the Mishnah in Avos (3:9), which states:

כָּל שִׁירְאֵת חֲטָאוֹ קוֹדֶמֶת לְחֻקָּתוֹ, חֻקָּתוֹ מִתְקַיֶּמֶת, וְכָל שִׁחְקָתוֹ קוֹדֶמֶת לִירְאֵת חֲטָאוֹ, אִין חֻקָּתוֹ מִתְקַיֶּמֶת.

“(Regarding) anyone whose fear of sin precedes his wisdom – his wisdom will endure. But (regarding) anyone whose wisdom precedes his fear of sin – his wisdom will not endure.”

R’ Chaim Volozhiner (*Nefesh Hachaim 4:4*) famously employs the model of a silo to explain this Mishnah, based on the *passuk*: הִיא אוֹצָרוֹ – “The fear of Hashem is his store-house” (*Yeshayah 33:6*). If a silo is empty of grain, of course, it serves little purpose; on the other hand, if one has an abundance of grain but does not store it properly, it will all be lost. One’s Torah accomplishments are the grain; but they will only endure if there was first prepared a suitable receptacle comprised of *yiras Hashem*. Only then will the “grain” be preserved.

The Nesivos Shalom (*Vol. II, Shavuos, § 3*) explains the positions of Moshe and Betzalel along similar lines. Through the Sanctuary service – primarily performed with the sacred vessels – one attains elevation and inspiration. As such, the *keilim* are representative of *ahavas Hashem* (love of Hashem), the highest level of serving Him. The Mishkan itself, which we are enjoined to fear and respect (*cf. Vayikra 19:30*), is emblematic of the attribute of *yirah*, a most necessary but lesser quality in serving Hashem.

As such, Moshe felt that priority should be granted toward fashioning the *keilim*; after all, these were associated with the highest level of serving Hashem, with the attribute of *ahavah*. Betzalel, who favored dealing first with the Mishkan, did not disagree with the actual assessment; of course, obtaining *ahavas Hashem* represents the degree of the utmost righteousness. His point, however, was that it was first essential to lay the proper groundwork. This is why he favored first building the Mishkan itself, which reflected *yirah*. Without a proper receptacle in the form of *yirah*, the *ahavah* itself would not endure.