

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Vayekhel-Pekudei
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פרשת ויקהל-פקודי
כ"ז באדר תשע"ז

Torah Reading: *Shmot* (Exodus) 35:1-40:38
Maftir: Parashat Hachodesh: Shmot 12:1-20

In these *parshiyot* the Bnei Yisrael bring so many materials for the construction of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) that Moshe tells them to stop; Betzalel and Oholiav, gifted craftspeople, construct the elements of the *Mishkan*. The work of constructing the *Mishkan* is completed; Moshe receives the command to anoint its vessels and to anoint Aharon and the *cohanim* (priests).

There is a classic debate between Rashi (11th century Franco-Germany) and Ramban (13th century Spain/Palestine) about the building of the *Mishkan*. Rashi believes that God intended all along for the Jewish people to build the *Mishkan* as a sanctuary for their worship. That's why the command to build the *Mishkan* precedes the story of the Golden Calf. Ramban believes that the commandment to build the *Mishkan* came only in response to the sin of the Golden Calf (hence the story of the Golden Calf being "bookended" by the commandment before it and the execution of the commandment after it). Having erected a material representation of someone other than God, building a material space for the worship of the true God represented a measure-for-measure atonement.

Literary analysis of the text can support each opinion. Each is feasible and represents that commentator's approach to the text and to life. Rashi, until the end of his life, dwelt in relative harmony with his non-Jewish neighbors. The Crusades began at the end of the 11th Century and destroyed Rashi's world and community. Rashi often gives a huge amount of latitude to sinners, perhaps because of his life experience of having gone through the Crusades.

Ramban, conversely, lived in the Golden Age of Spain. During that era, many Jews left the fold and embraced Islam. He is, as a general rule, much tougher on sinners than Rashi. It is, therefore, logical that he would see the building of the *Mishkan* as an atonement for a whopper of a sin.

A third, lesser known opinion exists as well. Sforno (16th century Italy) maintains that God tries to help humans succeed, as individuals and as a species. His approach to the Bible, in broad terms, stresses human striving and failure, retribution, God's scaffolding of the human, and the human trying again with a greater (although not perfect) degree of success. This can be seen through the cycles of Adam, Noah, the forefathers and foremothers, and other characters who populate the Bible.

In this episode, according to Sforno, God realized through the erection of the Golden Calf that, although ultimately people should not need a finite space – a material building – in which to worship the incorporeal, infinite Being, they do. As a response, God commanded them to build the physical sanctuary to make it easier to focus on the worship of God whom they cannot see, hear, or feel.

Whichever opinion resonates for each of us, this account begins almost a millennium of centralized worship of God, a phenomenon which, unfortunately, we have not been able to experience for the last two millennia.

Shabbat Shalom.

For discussion:

- What do the *Mishkan* and the Golden Calf have in common? Do you think this is a coincidence?
- If Hashem is Infinite, how can the Divine Presence be confined in a sanctuary?
- Which of the commentators, if any, do you think is right? Did Hashem always want the *Mishkan*, was it to atone for the Golden Calf, was it to help the Jews worship Hashem, or did it involve something different altogether?