

Likutei Divrei Torah

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Shabbat Parashat Pekudei

Shabbat Shalom

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Covenant & Conversation: R. Jonathan Sacks, z"l

On Jewish Character - Pekudei has sometimes been called the accountant's parsha, because that is how it begins, with the audited accounts of the money and materials donated to the Sanctuary. It is the Torah's way of teaching us the need for financial transparency.

But beneath the sometimes dry surface lie two extraordinary stories, one told in last week's parsha, the other the week before, teaching us something deep about Jewish nature that is still true today.

The first has to do with the Sanctuary itself. God told Moses to ask people to make contributions. Some brought gold, some silver, some copper. Some gave wool or linen or animal-skins. Others contributed acacia wood, oil, spices or incense. Some gave precious stones for the High Priest's breastplate. What was remarkable was the willingness with which they gave:

The people continued to bring freewill offerings morning after morning. So all the skilled workers who were doing all the work on the Sanctuary left what they were doing and said to Moses, "The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the Lord commanded to be done."

So 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, because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work.

They brought too much. Moses had to tell them to stop. That is not the Israelites as we have become accustomed to seeing them, argumentative, quarrelsome, ungrateful. This is a people that longs to give.

One parsha earlier we read a very different story. The people were anxious. Moses had been up the mountain for a long time. Was he still alive? Had some accident happened to him? If so, how would they receive the Divine word telling them what to do and where to go? Hence their demand for a calf – essentially an oracle, an object through which Divine instruction could be heard.

Aaron, according to the most favoured explanation, realised that he could not stop the people directly by refusing their request, so he adopted a stalling manoeuvre. He did something with the intention of slowing them down, trusting that if the work could be delayed, Moses would reappear. This is what he said: Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me."

According to the Midrash he thought this would create arguments within families and the project would be delayed. Instead, immediately thereafter, without a pause, we read: So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron.

Again the same generosity. Now, these two projects could not be less alike. One, the Tabernacle, was holy. The other, the calf, was close to being an idol. Building the Tabernacle was a supreme mitzvah; making the calf was a terrible sin. Yet their response was the same in both cases. Hence this comment of the sages:

One cannot understand the nature of this people. If they are appealed to for a calf, they give. If appealed to for the Tabernacle, they give.

The common factor was generosity. Jews may not always make the right choices in what they give to,

but they give.

In the twelfth century, Moses Maimonides twice interrupts his customary calm legal prose in his law code, the Mishneh Torah, to make the same point. Speaking about tzedakah, charity, he says:

"We have never seen or heard about a Jewish community which does not have a charity fund."

The idea that a Jewish community could exist without a network of charitable provisions was almost inconceivable. Later in the same book, Maimonides says: We are obligated to be more scrupulous in fulfilling the commandment of tzedakah than any other positive commandment because tzedakah is the sign of the righteous person, a descendant of Abraham our father, as it is said, "For I know him, that he will command his children . . . to do tzedakah" . . . If someone is cruel and does not show mercy, there are sufficient grounds to suspect his lineage, since cruelty is found only among the other nations . . . Whoever refuses to give charity is called Belial, the same term which is applied to idol worshippers.

Maimonides is here saying more than that Jews give charity. He is saying that a charitable disposition is written into Jewish genes, part of our inherited DNA. It is one of the signs of being a child of Abraham, so much so that if someone does not give charity there are "grounds to suspect his lineage." Whether this is nature or nurture or both, to be Jewish is to give.

There is a fascinating feature of the geography of the land of Israel. It contains two seas: the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee is full of life. The Dead Sea, as its name implies, is not. Yet they are fed by the same river, the Jordan. The difference is that the Sea of Galilee receives water and gives water. The Dead Sea receives but does not give. To receive but not to give is, in Jewish geography as well as Jewish psychology, simply not life. So it was in the time of Moses. So it is today. In virtually every country in which Jews live, their charitable giving is out of all proportion to their numbers. In Judaism, to live is to give.

The Person in the Parsha: R. Tzvi Hershel Weinreb

Above Suspicion - I have written and lectured extensively on the topic of Jewish leadership. I have frequently indicated that I consider Moses our teacher, Moshe Rabbeinu, a role model for those who would be leaders.

Once, after a lecture on just this topic, I opened the floor to a question-and-answer session. I have always found such sessions useful and instructive. The questions that are raised by the audience are often quite provocative, raising unanticipated issues.

On this particular occasion, a gentleman in the audience raised a question which encouraged me to think long and hard. He asked, "Rabbi, can you recall a moment in your own career when Moses' example influenced your leadership behavior? What specific lesson did you learn from Moses?"

At first, a number of possibilities came to mind. After all, Moses was a teacher, an advocate for the people, a person who came to the aid of the oppressed, a selfless person. Surely there are many aspects of Moses' life that I have tried, however inadequately, to emulate.

But after some introspection, I recalled one specific incident and shared it with the audience. I told them that the one time I most consciously followed Moses' example was the time when I was entrusted

with some Chanukah gelt.

When I was a child, I remember fondly how my grandfather would gather all of his grandchildren around the Chanukah menorah, have us line up in order of our ages, and distribute to each of us a silver dollar, Chanukah gelt. Many still practice this custom, although I suspect that nowadays far more than a silver dollar is distributed.

One year, back when I was the rabbi of my former synagogue, I received a phone call from a gentleman just a few days before Chanukah. This gentleman was one of the influential trustees of a major charitable foundation. I had interacted with him many times with regard to proposals I submitted to the foundation for grants to community institutions. He typically studied these proposals very assiduously and asked very demanding questions of me about these proposals. He would say, "There is much that I find worthwhile in your proposal. My tendency to be generous inclines me to grant you the funds you request, but I cannot be generous with someone else's money."

He voted against almost every proposal that I submitted.

One year, just a few days before Chanukah, he called. At that point, none of my proposals for charity was even under consideration. I was surprised by his call and even more surprised when he asked me to lunch that very day.

We met at a local restaurant and chatted about all sorts of things for the better part of an hour. Finally, he asked me if I knew what Chanukah gelt was. He himself had fond memories of the Jewish customs he had experienced in his childhood.

When I assured him that I knew very well what Chanukah gelt was, he withdrew an envelope from his pocket and said, "Here is a check for Chanukah gelt. I know that you control a discretionary charity fund and I'd like you to deposit this check in that fund for the use of truly needy families."

Of course, I thanked him profusely for the donation. I did not think it was proper to open the envelope in his presence, so I didn't open it until I returned to my car. I was astonished to find that the sum was easily equal to the yearly salary of most of the members of my congregation. When I looked at the check more carefully, I noted that he had made out the check to me personally, and not to my discretionary fund.

I cannot deny that I immediately heard the loud voice of temptation. But, along with that voice, another voice was heard, and it uttered nothing other than the first verse of this week's Torah portion, Parshat Pekudei: "These are the records of the Tabernacle . . . which were drawn up at Moses' bidding . . . under the direction of Itamar son of Aaron the Priest."

The people had contributed vast amounts of silver and gold and other precious materials for the construction of the Tabernacle. Moses, and only Moses, was in charge. He was, in the words of the Midrash, a gizbar, the comptroller of those funds. Technically, he was accountable to no one. He did not have to make a reckoning, and he certainly did not have to invite another person into the process.

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But our verse tells us that he not only initiated a reckoning, but he invited his nephew, Itamar, to hold him to account. He insisted upon full accountability for every bit of the material collected.

Midrash Rabbah comments, making use of other biblical verses: "'A dependable man will receive many blessings, but one in a hurry to get rich will not go unpunished.' Moses was a dependable man, as is written, 'Not so with my servant Moses; he is trusted throughout my household.' He alone was the gizbar, yet he invited others to perform the accounting...our verse does not read, 'These are the records which were drawn up by Moses,' but rather, 'These are the records which were drawn up at Moses bidding.' Moses asked to be held accountable, and did what he could to be assured that he would be held accountable."

Getting back to that cold pre-Chanukah afternoon, I am proud to say that my conscience prevailed. It was in the days before cell phones, but I immediately went to the nearest phone booth and called my "Itamar," a respected member of my congregation. I told him that I held this magnanimous gift in my hands and wanted him to know about it. I asked him to form a small committee which would decide exactly how to distribute the "Chanukah gelt" to those who needed it the most. Until today, we jokingly refer to that committee as "the Itamar committee."

The Torah Temimah commentary, written by Rabbi Baruch Epstein, cites an earlier halachic authority known as Bach: "Although a trustee of charity who has proven himself trustworthy need not be scrutinized, it is, nevertheless, advisable that he give a full reckoning of his collections and distributions, as did Moses our teacher."

Long after the incident with the Chanukah gelt, I came upon this astute remark in the book *The Transparent Society* by David Brin: "When it comes to privacy and accountability, people always demand the former for themselves and the latter for everyone else." Not so with Moses. He demanded accountability for himself, and so should we all.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Why is Purim celebrated in the second month of Adar and not the first? In this Jewish leap year we are now commencing the second month of Adar and fascinatingly, in the Gemara (Megillah 6b), there is a debate as to which Adar Purim should be in. Rav Eliezer's view, which many of us can identify with, is, "Ein ma'avirim al hamitzvot," – "We shouldn't delay a mitzvah," particularly the celebration of a happy mitzvah. Don't put it off – once you've got the chance, go for it! Therefore he advocates that Purim should be celebrated in the first month of Adar.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel however differs and we follow his view in halacha. What's his rationale? He says that Purim should be in the second Adar in order not to separate one geula from the next, one celebration of redemption from the next celebration, that is to say that Purim and Pesach should be as close as possible on our calendar. Every year they're just one month apart and so too, that should be the case in a leap year. Now I might have thought that the opposite would be the case. If we've got two, major happy festivals, let's separate them. Why cluster them together?

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel here identifies something which we as Jews are passionate about. Having endured so much tragedy, hardship and sorrow over the ages, to be able to celebrate redemption is something very special for us and we don't just want it to be a one-off celebration. We want to be on a roll. We want to go from happiness to happiness and have none-stop happiness at long last for our people! That's why the joy of Purim is always linked on our calendar to the joy of Pesach.

We are exceptionally privileged and fortunate in our age to be able to celebrate yet other festivals of redemption: from Adar we go to Nissan and from Nissan we go to Iyar, during which we have the new festivals of Yom Ha'Atzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim. Therefore on our calendar today thanks to the inspiration we've received from our rabbis, we guarantee that indeed when it comes to celebrations we are on a roll. And in this spirit may Hashem bless our people with continuous joy, not to suffer great tragedies as we have in the past but to only go from one simcha through to the next.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org [Excerpt]

Rabbi Benjamin Yudin: Reverse, Then Hold Dear

In Parshas Pekudei we learn of the actualization of the Divine project to build a sanctuary to G-d. The Ramban teaches that the Mishkan was a continuation of Mount Sinai; at Sinai we received some of the 613 commandments and the process of receiving the rest of Torah was to be through Hashem's communication with Moshe at the Mishkan. As we are taught, "It is there that I will set My meetings with you, and I shall speak with you from atop the Cover, everything that I shall command you to the children of Israel." Now that this most holy endeavor of creating an Abode for the Divine, one would imagine that the book of Shemos would conclude with the actualization of the Divine promise. We would expect that we would read of Moshe's entering the Sanctuary and receiving communication from Hashem. To our surprise, this is not the way the book ends. Instead, almost to our dismay, the Torah teaches us at the very end of Pekudei that, "The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of Hashem filled the Tabernacle." Yet the very next verse tells us, "Moshe could not enter the Tent of Meeting, for the cloud rested upon it and the glory of Hashem filled the Tabernacle." How strange and difficult to understand. The whole purpose of the Mishkan was for Moshe to enter; and indeed in next week's parsha, Hashem summons Moshe to the Mishkan and gives him the detailed laws of korbanot. Why then could not Moshe immediately enter the Mishkan upon its completion? Moreover, we find the identical situation at the completion of the first Beis HaMikdash by Shlomo Hamelech. On the day of its dedication, right before the very lengthy prayer of the king, we find the very similar language in: "And it was as the Kohanim left the Sanctuary that the cloud filled the Temple of Hashem. The Kohanim could not stand and minister because of the cloud, for the glory of Hashem filled the Temple of Hashem." Once again, the very purpose of the Beis HaMikdash, which is, among other privileges, the place for man to offer sacrifices to Hashem, why could the Kohanim not actualize their function and potential?

Rav Nebenzahl shlit"a suggests that the Sanctuary is clearly the manifestation and outpouring of love between Hashem and the Jewish people. We are taught that the donations came from those who were "nediv lev - generous of heart", meaning that they were voluntary in nature, and that the response to the appeal for the construction of the Sanctuary was so overwhelming that Moshe had to stop the collection because it exceeded the needs. This is a manifestation of man's love for Hashem. The very building of a Sanctuary ordained by G-d is truly a manifestation of His love for the Jewish nation, as we find in "Tocho rotzuf ahava - its foundation was overlaid with love." The Mishkan was a fulfillment of G-d's desire to have an abode in this world demonstrating again His great love for the Jewish people.

However, ahava - love by itself, unbridled, unchecked, without limitations, can be most detrimental. Proof, the tragic sin of Nadav and Avihu is characterized by the Torah as "Vikarvasam lifnai

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Hashem - they approached Hashem", motivated by their abundant love which led them to offer an offering that was not commanded by Hashem. Rav Nebenzahl suggests that it is for this reason that together with the love there had to be a commensurate measure of yirah for the Sanctuary which in effect kept the love in check, and together reverence and love provide the perfect atmosphere and environment for the Divine.

The purpose of the Mishkan, as stated above, was a continuation of Sinai. Note that at the giving of the Torah at Sinai, we find several laws that needed to be implemented to ensure and maintain the reverence of the occasion. These enactments include: the need for all to go to mikvah, to abstain from relations with their spouse for three days prior to the Revelation and, finally, to set boundaries surrounding the mountain lest anyone, motivated by their incredible love for the Shechinah, would attempt to ascend the mountain. The giving of the Torah is a manifestation of His great love for the Jewish people, as we recite daily in our prayers in the second blessing before the recitation of the Shemah, "With an abundant love have You loved us Hashem... You taught the decrees of life." Your giving of the Torah reflects Your faith and trust in us. But this needed to be preceded and safeguarded by the infusion of the decrees reflecting reverence for the occasion. Similarly, regarding both the Mishkan and the first Beis HaMikdash, even Moshe, the most modest man, was unable to enter, teaching us man's inadequacy and lack of true worthiness to enter His holy abode. Only when man appreciates this sense of the incredible divide that exists between Hashem and man can he enter and communicate with Hashem.

We are familiar with the practice of taking three steps backwards before we begin the recitation of the Shemoneh Esrei, and then taking three steps forward and beginning to pray. The commentary Tehila LeDavid notes that this is not considered a hefsek between geula and tefila as the stepping backward, according to the Sefer Rokeach, is a sign of man's humility and total subjugation to the Almighty and only then is he in the proper framework to address Hashem.

We see clearly from the above that the blending of the two emotions of reverence and love is a prerequisite for entering the Mikdash. It is interesting to note that ahava, which comes from the root hav - to give, is very often accompanied by an object. One selects a beautiful esrog or other mitzvah object as a demonstration of their love of Hashem. Yirah, on the other hand, is not characterized most often by restricting oneself and abstaining from certain behavior. Thus eating in the Sukkah might be a demonstration of ahava for Hashem but not eating or drinking even that which is halachically permissible to do so, and refraining from even drinking a glass of water outside of the Sukkah, would be an indication of yirah. An individual taking upon themselves a more stringent observance of the law is a demonstration of yirah. The Chazon Ish posits that one who is desirous of improving and enhancing his character traits should begin with sur mayrah - abstaining from that which is negative as it is relatively easy for man to do acts of goodness, but to curb one's behavior is exceedingly challenging. Therefore King David writes "Turn from evil and do good", putting yirah before ahava, as we find as a prerequisite for Hashem to dwell in the Mikdash. Interestingly, when we are taught at the beginning of Terumah, "make for me a Sanctuary that I may dwell in them". Our Rabbis note it doesn't say that I may dwell in it, rather that I may dwell in them. I suggest that each person aspires to have a Divine presence in them and, therefore, each individual has to strive to constantly improve their yiras Shomayim to accompany their love for G-d, making oneself the proper receptacle for His Divine providence.