

VAYAKHEL-PEKUDEI: “A STATELY PLEASURE DOME”

Exodus 39:42-43

42. Just as the Eternal had commanded Moses, so the Israelites had done all the work.

43. And when Moses saw that they had performed all the tasks—as the Eternal had commanded, so they had done—Moses blessed them.

כָּל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְקֹוֹק אֶת־מֹשֶׁה בְּעֹשׂוֹ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵת כָּל־הָעֲבֹדָה:

וַיֵּרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶת־כָּל־הַמְּלָאכָה וְהִנֵּה עָשׂוּ אֹתָהּ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְקֹוֹק בְּעֹשׂוֹ וַיְבָרֵךְ אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה:

Exodus 40:33-35

33. And [Moses] set up the enclosure around the Tabernacle and the altar, and put up the screen for the gate of the enclosure. When Moses had finished the work,

34. the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the Eternal filled the Tabernacle.

35. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of the Eternal filled the Tabernacle.

וַיִּקַּם אֶת־הַחֲצֵר סָבִיב לַמִּשְׁכָּן וּלְמִזְבֵּחַ וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־מָסַךְ שַׁעַר הַחֲצֵר וַיְכַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמְּלָאכָה:

וַיִּכַס הָעָנָן אֶת־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּכָּבֹד יְקֹוֹק מִלֵּא אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן:

וְלֹא־יָכַל מֹשֶׁה לָּבוֹא אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד כִּי־שָׁכַן עָלָיו הָעָנָן וַיִּכָּבֹד יְקֹוֹק מִלֵּא אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן:

From: *If All the Seas Were Ink*

(Ilana Kurshan: ilanakurshan.com/2021/03/11/a-stately-pleasure-dome-vayakhel-pekudei/)

The two *parshiyot* we read this week, Vayakhel and Pekudei, describe the building of the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary, in accordance with the specifications that appeared in Terumah and Tetzaveh. Indeed, much of the language of this week’s *parshiyot* repeats the language of those earlier *parshiyot*, suggesting that the building of the Mishkan was merely the mechanical, mindless execution of God’s plan, without any room for human initiative. But the Talmud and midrash tell a very different story about the vision and creativity involved in building a dwelling place for God.

A simple reading of the biblical text suggests that God communicated a blueprint for building the Mishkan to Moshe, who imparted it to the artisans, who built in exact accordance with these specifications. But the rabbis did not imagine the process so smoothly. The Talmud (Menachot 29a) relates that the ark, table, and Menorah descended from heaven in fiery form for Moshe to replicate. Moshe turned to God in bewilderment: “How am I supposed to make like those?” (Bemidbar Rabbah 12:10). God responded that he is supposed to use wood and gold to recreate the structures shown to him in a fiery vision: “See and follow the patterns for them that are being shown to you on the mountain” (Exodus 25:40). This midrash suggests that when Moshe went up on Mount Sinai, he was given a vision of a Platonic ideal of the Temple vessels which he then had to translate into earthly materials.

The act of translating vision into reality was not easy for Moshe. The midrash (Tanchuma Vayikra 11:8) plays on the term used in the Torah to describe the fashioning of the Menorah from gold – it had to be *mikshah*, made of hammered work. The word *mikshah* comes from the same root as *kashah*, which means *hardness* and *difficulty*. The Menorah posed a particular challenge to Moshe, perhaps because of the elaborate cups, calyxes, and petals adorning its branches.

As the midrash relates, God therefore engraved the Menorah upon Moshe's hand when Moshe was up on Sinai. Moshe was instructed to descend the mountain and then copy the image God had engraved on his hand so as to fashion the Menorah. Only after receiving an in-person tutorial from God on the mountain was Moshe able to come down and fashion the Menorah.

According to this understanding, the challenge of building the Mishkan was the challenge of taking a heavenly vision and transforming it into human terms. This is a challenge familiar to many artists who are afforded a moment of inspiration in which they glimpse a vision which they must then translate into the materials at their disposal – whether it is paint or stone or music or language.

The British Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge dramatizes this artistic challenge in his poem “Kublah Khan.” Coleridge explains in a preface that he wrote the poem one night after he fell asleep reading about Xanadu, the palace of the Mongol ruler Kublah Khan. He woke with a poetic vision of the palace, which he set about writing down, but he was interrupted by a knock at the door and the vision fled. The poem depicts the glory of Xanadu while also capturing the poet's despair at his inability to recreate that “stately pleasure dome” in words, including the damsel who appeared in his vision of the palace:

*Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,*

*I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry “Beware, beware!”*

The poet longed to revive the symphony he heard and recreate the vision of the palace he saw in his dream, so that he might make domes and caves out of the airy immateriality of language. Devastatingly, the vision fled before he could take down notes on the palm of his hand, and the poem remained, as Coleridge termed it “a fragment.” His Mishkan was never built.

As Coleridge knew, much of the frustration of the artistic life is the frustration of trying to translate vision into reality and inevitably falling short. But this is also the challenge of the religious life. Our tradition imparts to us spiritual ideals that we have to incorporate into the messy reality of life on earth. Like the instructions for building the Mishkan, the Torah may be read as an instruction manual for building an ideal society: Care for the stranger. Respect the elderly. Do not covet. But when it comes to implementing those ideals in our legislation and in our lives, it is often far from simple.

And yet somewhat miraculously, as the Torah reports at the end of Pekudei, the Mishkan was completed according to plan: “Just as the Lord commanded Moshe, so the Israelites did all the work” (39:42). The cloud covers the Tent of Meeting and God's presence fills the Tabernacle – with its golden Menorah and its braided chains of corded work and its embroidered screens of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, all exactly as God ordained. The building of the Mishkan reminds us that when we are able to translate heavenly visions into human terms, we do not just craft works of magnificent beauty – we also create a space that points to God's presence in our midst.

Ilana Kurshan is the author of If All the Seas Were Ink and Why Is This Night Different From Other Nights. She has translated books of Jewish interest by Ruth Calderon, Benjamin Lau, and Micah Goodman, as well as novels, short stories, and children's picture books. She is a regular contributor to Lilith Magazine, where she is the Book Reviews Editor, and her writing has appeared in The Forward, The World Jewish Digest, Hadassah, Nashim, Zeek, Kveller, and Tablet.