

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VAYAKHEL - PEKUDEI

**“Let Them Make Themselves a Sanctuary,
That I Might Dwell in its Midst” –
On the Repetition of the Discussion of the *Mishkan***

By Rav Gad Eldad

a. **The sin of the golden calf in between the two discussions of the *Mishkan*¹**

One of the most conspicuous examples of repetition in the Torah is found in the section devoted to the *Mishkan*. Following the detailed list of commands in the *Parashot* of *Teruma* and *Tetzaveh*, instead of simply noting, “And the people did as Moshe had commanded,” we find all the details of the construction repeated over again.² In this *shiur*, we will examine the sin of the golden calf, which is recorded in between the commands concerning the *Mishkan* and their fulfillment, and its results and ramifications, with a view to explaining this phenomenon.³

This debacle threatened *Am Yisrael* with annihilation, “had not Moshe, His chosen one, stood before Him in the breach” (*Tehillim* 106:23). While the nation was not destroyed, the relationship between *Am Yisrael* and God were fundamentally changed in the wake of the sin:

And Moshe returned to the Lord and said, “I pray You – this nation has sinned a great sin, and they have made themselves gods of gold. And now, if You will forgive their sin – and if not, blot me, I pray You, out of Your book which You have written.” And the Lord said to Moshe, “Whoever has sinned against Me – him I will blot out of My book. Therefore now go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you; behold, My angel shall go before you, nevertheless in the day when I punish, I will punish their sin upon them.” (*Shemot* 32:31-34)

b. **“I have sent My angel before you”**

¹ The *shiur* is based on my article, “*Va-Asu Lahem Mikdash Ve-Shakhanti Be-Tokho – Le-Bi’ur Kefilut Parshiyot Ha-Mishkan*,” *Megadim* 32 (5760), pp. 21-30.

² Nechama Leibowitz (*Iyunim Chadashim Be-Sefer Shemot*, 5730, pp. 453-461) reviews the different approaches to this problem among the commentators.

³ There is a fundamental difference of opinion among the commentators as to the order of the events. Our discussion adheres to the chronology reflected in the text, which supports Ramban’s view (*Shemot* 35:1) that the episode of the golden calf indeed occurred in between the command to build the *Mishkan* and its fulfillment. Rashi (*Shemot* 31:18), on the other hand, maintains that the order in which the events are recorded does not reflect the actual chronology, and that the command to build the *Mishkan* was itself given only as a result of the debacle of the golden calf.

The nation is informed that an angel will henceforth mediate between them and God, and they respond with sadness:

And the Lord said to Moshe, “Depart, and go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt... And I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Cana’ani, the Emori, and the Chitti, and the Perizzi, the Chiwi, and the Yevusi, into a land flowing with milk and honey, for I will not go up in your midst, for you are a stiff-necked people, lest I consume you on the way.” And when the people heard these evil tidings they mourned, and no man put on his ornaments. (*Shemot* 33:1-4)

This new situation has a number of ramifications. First, Moshe moves his tent away from the camp:

And Moshe would take the Tent, and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the Tent of Meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the Lord went out to the Tent of Meeting, which was outside the camp... And the Lord spoke to Moshe face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he turned back to the camp, but his servant Yehoshua bin Nun, a young man, did not depart out of the Tent. (*Shemot* 33:7-11)

In addition, Moshe engages in dialogue in an attempt to understand God’s ways:

And Moshe said to the Lord, “See, You say to me, Bring up this people – and You have not let me know whom You will send with me. Yet You have said, I know you by name, and you have also found favor in My sight. Now therefore I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You, that I may find favor in Your sight, and consider that this nation is Your people.” (*Shemot* 33:12-13)

The juxtaposition of Moshe’s request with the events preceding it is not clear. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that Moshe states the reason for his request: he says that it arises specifically from the anticipated appearance of the angel to guide the people in the desert.

c. **“For he will not pardon your transgressions, for My Name is in him”**

To clarify the new situation, let us go back to the first mention of the possibility of an angel leading the people:

“Behold, I send an angel before you, to keep you in the way, and to bring you to the place which I have prepared. Take heed of him and obey his voice, do not provoke him, for he will not pardon your transgressions, **for My Name is in him.**” (*Shemot* 23:20-21)

Apparently, the angel's authority and status flow from "God's Name in him." In light of this, let us reconsider Moshe's words:

And Moshe said to the Lord: "See, You say to me, Bring up this people – and You have not let me know whom You will send with me. **Yet You have said, I know you by name**, and you have also found favor in My sight." (*Shemot* 32:12)

Ramban explains as follows:

And this is the meaning of, "Yet You have said, I know you by name" – that "You know me and You have raised me up **by Your Name**." (Ramban, *Shemot* 32:12)

According to his interpretation, the expression "byname" refers to God's Name, not Moshe's name. This illuminates Moshe's request in a different light. Moshe argues that just as the angel's authority flows from God's Name in him, he (Moshe) has also merited having God "know him by name." Now he seeks to achieve a higher level and have God make His ways known to him. This will make the angel redundant, since Moshe himself will fulfill the function set aside for him.

The compromise proposed by Moshe provides a response to both sides. God will display His distance from the nation by addressing Moshe alone. At the same time, the blow to the nation will be softened by the fact that Moshe will continue to be the only intermediary in God's dealings with them. From this point, Moshe will serve not only as the leader and representative of the people, but also as the angel and emissary of God.

The text seems to suggest that God acceded to Moshe's request:

And he said, "I now I have found favor in Your sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray You, go among us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your inheritance." And He said, "**Behold, I make a covenant**, before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation, and all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the Lord **that I will do with you** [singular], that it is tremendous." (*Shemot* 34:9-10)

God forges a new covenant that will bring about wonders. If we read the verse carefully, we discover that these wonders will be performed **before** all of Israel, but **with** Moshe alone.

This describes the new relationship between the parties. God focuses on Moshe, and Moshe's role is to lead the people in accordance with God's word to him. Since a new covenant has been made, in a format other than what had been expected, the Torah once again provides its appendices, which had already been set forth in the previous version. These include the prohibition of idolatry and the unit on the festivals (*Shemot* 34:11-26).

d. **"And Moshe did not know that the skin of his face shone"**

At this point, the Torah abruptly changes its focus to the

radiance of Moshe's face:

And it was, when Moshe came down from Mount Sinai with the two Tablets of Testimony in Moshe's hand, when he came down from the mountain, that Moshe did not know that the skin of his face shone while He talked with him. And when Aharon and all of *Bnei Yisrael* saw Moshe, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. And Moshe called to them, and Aharon and all the rulers of the congregation returned to him, and Moshe talked with them. And afterwards all of *Bnei Yisrael* came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him at Mount Sinai. And when Moshe had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face. But when Moshe went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he took the veil off, until he came out. And he came out, and spoke to *Bnei Yisrael* that which he was commanded. And *Bnei Yisrael* saw the face of Moshe, that the skin of Moshe's face shone, and Moshe put the veil upon his face again, until he went in to speak with Him." (*Shemot* 34:29-35)

Aside from the puzzling location of this unit, the significance of the radiance of Moshe's face also demands some explanation. The text notes that "they were afraid to come near him," suggesting that the phenomenon was in fact meant to create distance from Moshe and awe of him. This would explain why the radiance of his face is mentioned specifically here, although Moshe had spoken with God already many times before. Seemingly, the Torah is indicating that Moshe is no longer the same familiar figure that he was prior to the sin of the golden calf. Now he functions as an "angel of God," and the radiance of his face symbolizes the gap between him and the human race by virtue of this status.

Making use of the veil, Moshe fulfills two missions. While he conveys God's word to the people, he functions as an angel of God. At such times he removes the veil and strikes fear in those around him. Afterwards, he covers his face, thereby facilitating communication between the people and the mortal Moshe, as their leader of old.

Let us now consider the ramifications of this development on the command concerning the *Mishkan*.

e. **"And he called it the Tent of Meeting"**

And Moshe would take the Tent, and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the Tent of Meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the Lord went out to the Tent of Meeting, which was outside the camp... And the Lord spoke to Moshe face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he turned back to the camp, but his servant Yehoshua bin Nun, a young man, did not depart out of the Tent. (*Shemot* 33:7-11)

In citing this unit above, describing the distancing of God's relations with His people, we ignored the most surprising reference to Moshe's tent as the "Tent of Meeting". This term is already familiar to us as a reference to the *Mishkan* itself (*Shemot* 27:21). How are we to understand its use here? Seemingly, Moshe's tent – now located at a distance from the camp – represents the very opposite of the *Mishkan* and a

constant reminder of God's **non-presence** amongst the people.

Ibn Ezra addresses this question in his short commentary:

The point of the entire unit is that God said to Moshe, prior to the sin of the golden calf, "They shall make Me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (*Shemot* 25:8), and after they made the golden calf He said, "I shall not go up in your midst" – indicating that **there would now be no Sanctuary**. But when Moshe pleaded before God, He told him that the Divine Presence would rest upon the Tent, meaning, **the Tent of Moshe**. (Ibn Ezra, *Shemot* 33:17)

According to Ibn Ezra, the fact that Moshe's tent is referred to by exactly the same name as the *Mishkan* is the clearest possible statement of the crisis in the prospects for the *Mishkan*. For the meantime, the project of building the *Mishkan* in the nation's midst is shelved. At this stage, there is no need for such a *Mishkan*, since a *Mishkan* already exists and God rests in the midst of His chosen one – Moshe.

To illustrate this point, let us consider another aspect of the narrative.

f. **"Hew yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones"**

The expression, "Hew yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones" appears twice in the Torah. The first appearance is in its chronological place, following the sin of the golden calf. After God accedes to Moshe's request and allows him to "see the back of God," He commands him:

"Hew yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones, and I will write upon these tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke... And no man shall come up with you, neither let any man be seen throughout all the mountain..." And he hewed two tablets of stone like the first ones, and Moshe rose up early in the morning, and went up to Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and he took in his hand the two tablets of stone. (*Shemot* 34:1-4)

The same expression appears again in *Sefer Devarim*, with the addition of a command to build a wooden ark in which to place the tablets:

At that time the Lord said to me, "Hew yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones, and come up to Me into the mountain, and make for yourself an ark of wood. And I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets which you broke, and you shall put them in the ark." And I made an ark of shittim wood, and hewed two tablets of stone like the first ones and went up to the mountain, having the two tablets in my hand. And He wrote on the tablets, according to the first writing – the ten matters which the Lord spoke to you in the mountain out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly – and the Lord gave them to me. And I turned and came down from the mountain, and put the tablets in the ark which I had made, and there they were, as the Lord commanded me. (*Devarim* 10:1-5)

The commentators are divided as to which ark is referred to here.⁴ According to the analysis proposed above, this command would seem to support and complement the role of "Moshe's tent" as a "Tent of Meeting" by imbuing it with tangible content, in the form of the tablets.

Attention should be paid to the fact that the command concerning the second tablets is formulated with a focus on privacy, with the matter addressed to Moshe alone. In contrast to the original revelation at Sinai, which was witnessed by the entire nation, this second giving of the Tablets is carried out quietly and in a "sterile" environment. When it is over, Moshe holds in his hands the stone tablets, which are placed in a wooden ark. It seems logical, then, that this wooden ark should be placed in the new "Tent of Meeting," which is Moshe's tent.

Thus concludes the inauguration of the Tent and its vessels in the new, contracted version. The renewed giving of the Torah suits the new reality in which there is a clear distinction between Moshe, the "angel of God," and the nation that follows him.⁵

But if the relations between the nation and God have now stabilized in the format described above, a question mark hovers over the fate of the *Mishkan* in the midst of the people. According to our discussion, a "*Mishkan*" is in fact already extant and functioning. How, then, could Moshe know that God still wanted the original *Mishkan* to be built?⁶

g. **"They shall make Me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst"**

⁴ See Ramban's comments on Rashi (*Devarim* 11:1), leading to the question of the dating of this unit: "On the basis of the plain text (*peshat*), the command, 'And make for yourself an ark of wood' might allude to the *aron* that was made by Betzalel. This is so because initially Moshe had been commanded concerning the *Mishkan* and all its vessels, and the first command was, 'They shall make an *aron* (ark) of shittim wood...' (*Shemot* 25:10), since the essential purpose of the entire *Mishkan* was that God would rest above the *keruvim*. After that they made the golden calf, and when God acquiesced to Moshe and told him to write on these [second] tablets what had been written on the first, He commanded him in brief terms to make a wooden ark for these tablets – the [same] command he had been given for the first tablets. Now [God] reminded him of the original command concerning the *Mishkan*, [the command] upon which everything depended – and from this Moshe deduced that the *Mishkan* and its vessels should be made, as he had been commanded at the outset" (Ramban, *Devarim* 10:1).

⁵ This idea is supported by the concluding verse of the unit in *Devarim*: "And I stayed in the mountain, like the first time, forty days and forty nights, and the Lord listened to me at that time also, and the Lord would not destroy you. And the Lord said to me, 'Arise, take your journey before the people, that they may go in and possess the land which I swore to their fathers to give them'" (*Devarim* 10:10-11). This formulation hints to the role that God had previously described for the angel: "And I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Cana'ani, the Emori and the Chitti and the Perizzi, the Chivvi, and the Yevusi, into a land flowing with milk and honey, for I will not go up in your midst, for you are a stiff-necked people, lest I consume you on the way" (*Shemot* 33:2-3). It seems that by taking on the role that God had defined for the angel, Moshe managed to prevent the angel's dispatch.

⁶ According to the Ramban (see above, n. 4), even Moshe acknowledges that an explicit Divine command would be needed to renew the construction of the *Mishkan* in the midst of the nation. To his view, however, this command was indeed given, as he proves from *Sefer Devarim*. Since we propose a different understanding of the unit in *Sefer Devarim*, the question remains.

people rose up and worshipped, every man at his tent door. (*Shemot* 33:9-10)

This atmosphere of uncertainty surrounding the *Mishkan* is exacerbated by the formulation of the command itself when it is given for the second time. The original command had included a description of the purpose of the *Mishkan* – “They shall make Me a Sanctuary **that I might dwell in their midst.**” Now this purpose is conspicuous in its absence:

And Moshe spoke to all the congregation of *Bnei Yisrael*, saying, “This is the thing which the Lord commanded, saying: Take from among you an offering to the Lord; whoever is of a willing heart, let him bring it, an offering of the Lord – gold and silver and brass and blue and purple and scarlet and fine linen and goats’ hair and rams’ skins dyed red, and tachash skins, and shittim wood and oil for the light and spices for anointing oil and for the sweet incense and shoham stones and stones to be set for the *efod* and for the breastplate. And every wise hearted man among you shall come and make all that the Lord has commanded...” (*Shemot* 35:4-10)

It seems that at this point, Moshe cannot guarantee that the Divine Presence will indeed rest in the *Mishkan*, and he therefore omits this point. But if this is so, then our question becomes even more pressing. From where did Moshe draw the confidence to announce a renewal of the construction of the *Mishkan*?

h. Repetition of the units concerning the *Mishkan*

We wish to propose that this decision belongs to the category described in the *gemara*: “Moshe acted on his own initiative, and the Divine Presence gave its approval.”⁷ Moshe recognizes and takes advantage of the uncertainty surrounding the commands relating to the *Mishkan*. While there is now seemingly no need for the *Mishkan*, at the same time it has not been officially cancelled. In the midst of this ambiguity, Moshe puts the nation to work on this project, in the hope that with the construction of the *Mishkan* the relations between God and the nation will return to their previous level.

With the completion of the work, we read:

And the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the *Mishkan*. **And Moshe could not enter the Tent of Meeting** because the cloud rested on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the *Mishkan*. (*Shemot* 40:34-35)

These verses are a complete contrast to the description of “Moshe’s tent,” which has served until now as the Tent of Meeting:

And it was, **as Moshe entered the tent**, the cloudy pillar descended and stood at the door of the Tent, and [God] talked with Moshe. And all the people saw the cloudy pillar stand at the door of the Tent, and all the

Previously, Moshe had entered his own private tent in order to meet with God; now this is no longer possible. He can no longer enter the “Tent of Meeting” because this tent is no longer his private domain. Ultimately, the Divine Presence rests amongst Israel and this tent becomes its exclusive resting place.

For this reason, the text cannot summarize and say, “And *Bnei Yisrael* did all that God had commanded Moshe” – because at the time when the *Mishkan* was made, it was not clear whether this was in fact what God had commanded. Only after the completion of the building did it become clear that the whole process was regarded in a positive light. Moshe had merited Divine agreement and had achieved a Divine stamp of approval on the nation’s efforts.⁸

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⁷ The *gemara* in *Shabbat* 87a cites three examples of this phenomenon, one of which is the breaking of the tablets of the Covenant. Over the course of the generations, the *Rishonim* added other examples. See Ramban, *Bamidbar* 16:5; *Tanna Devei Eliyahu* 4; and *Sefer Ha-Ikharim* 4:22.

⁸ The Torah does not describe the development of the events as we have done above. We might propose that this omission is deliberate, so as to create the impression that the building of the *Mishkan* was evidently necessary and was carried out in accordance with God’s command. Thus, the Torah hints that the agreement of the Divine Presence to the deeds of *Bnei Yisrael* is not only retroactive approval, but a sign that this is what had been expected of them from the outset. This represents the deeper meaning of the phrase in the *gemara*, “The Divine Presence gave its approval to them [Moshe’s decisions].” This is a clear sign of God’s love for Israel. For further elaboration, see my article cited above, n. 1.