

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



THE GREATEST BUILDING PROJECT

Vayakhel

This week's Torah reading begins with Moshe gathering the entire nation for a major announcement. The problem is that the information that he relates doesn't seem to warrant a major convocation. Moshe Rabbeinu informs the nation that, although you already know about Shabbat, I want you to know that you should not kindle any flames. Plus, you know all those building instructions I gave you in chapters 25 through 31, well here they are again in excruciatingly boring detail. What am I missing? Why did this information warrant a complete assembly of the nation?

Well, two important details are crucial. First, there is a critical textual hint which must be noted. Moshe informs us that we have to perform VAYAKHEL, a great gathering of the nation. However, a careful reading of the Golden Calf incident includes the information that the rebels VAYIKAHEL, gathered against Aharon (Sh'mot 32:1), which has the

exact same spelling, but not pronunciation of our term. So, we have a hint that we are engaged in a massive undoing of at least some of the damage of that first negative gathering with a second positive gathering.

The Ibn Ezra, by the way, conjectures that before the sin only Moshe knew about the building instructions. So, this was a new and exciting set of instructions for the nation.

Plus, we have a fascinating comment by Rav Shimshon Rephael Hirsch. Rav Hirsch says that the Jewish nation was in a state of great doubt about the future: Would they build God's dwelling on earth or not! So, the masses were standing there in a state of great trepidation and uncertainty awaiting the word.

Then they get the double news bulletin from Moshe:

1. The nation must keep the Shabbat, especially refraining from the kindling of fire,
2. Start the building drive to construct all the furnishings and structures previously commanded to Moshe.

This juxtaposition is important. Fire is the basic technology that separates humans from animals. However, in the

incident of the Golden Calf fire worked against the Jews, when, as Aharon told Moshe, 'I said to them, Those who have any gold, let them take it off. So they gave it to me; then I cast it into the fire, and out came this calf' (32:24). Symbolically, the fire produced the idol, not the people. But on Shabbat we don't perform deeds of craft or technology, we encourage our souls to commune with God and the Cosmos.

Shabbat represents humanity's ability to curb our desires for mastery, but scientific know-how can be an enemy, or at least the YETZER HARA (temptation). Rav Zvi Dov Kanatopsky z"l explains that observing Shabbat represents humanity's ability to control our innate desires for mastery. Fire represents both humanity's technological prowess, and it can also be the symbol of humanity's longings and emotions, as in 'I burn with desire.'

So, the Jews are reassured that God indeed still intends to build the Mishkan and dwell in our midst (Sh'mot 25:8). That good news is eventually followed by the report that Jews have brought more material than is required for the project (36:5-6). What should be done? Moshe immediately announces, 'Stop!' A word not ever heard in fundraisers. Why? Because

the Jews are learning self-control. Just like we can show restraint on Shabbat, we are not at all like the impulsive rioters who forced the Golden Calf upon Aharon.

Rav Kanatopsky noted that the Jews displayed a deep desire to be part of this great project. However, now these Jews demonstrate the emotional strength to stop and show the world and themselves that they are not 'out of control'. Our religious zeal requires great devotion to God and our Divine service, but we never lose control of our senses and our selves.

Our ancestors were to get their Mishkan, a sanctuary representing God's Presence in their midst. But many commentaries have noted that the first version of the Mishkan instructions began with the utensils and furnishings to be placed inside the sanctuary. However, in the second version we reverse the order and begin with the structure and afterwards the utensils. Why? The Ramban points out that the utensils were for the Divine Service. Initially, the primary purpose of the Mishkan was the AVODA (service).

However, in the second iteration of the instructions the emphasis would be on the building meant to house the Presence of God in our midst, rather than the actual activities of the

Mishkan. Before the sin of the Golden Calf the Jews were on a very high spiritual level (perhaps comparable to Adam and Eve before the original sin). God's Presence could be felt anywhere in the Camp, a new version of the Garden of Eden. But now the emphasis must be on a special structure where the Divine Presence could be housed, separate from the camp and the world.

So, the Mishkan and later the Beit HaMikdash could mean different things to various observers. It could be the place for KAPARA (atonement for sin), for AVODA (Divine Service) or for sensing the SHECHINA (Divine Presence). They are all holy, special and unique. For us, on the other hand, it is a dream. But just like God bestowed this treasure on that generation, we remain confident in the fulfillment of that dream. 