

TORAH
OF
Reconciliation

SHELDON LEWIS



VAYAKHEL ויקהל

(Exodus 35:1–38:20)

Unity Is the Defining Requirement for Building the Tabernacle

And Moses assembled all the congregation of the children of Israel, and said to them...: “Take from among you an offering to the Lord, whosoever is of a willing heart, let him bring it, the Lord’s offering: gold, and silver, and brass; and blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen, and goats’ hair.” (Exodus 35:1, 5–6)

On the day following Yom Kippur [Moses called everyone together]. (Rashi, Exodus 35:1)

By allusion, it is said that this assembly (*hakhel*) was to mediate peace between them because a person does not [wish] to dwell together with a snake. And since he [Moses] wanted to inform them about the building of the Tabernacle in which [everyone] would be involved as if he would bring them all to dwell in one abode, therefore he needed to assemble them [in a manner] that they first be unified. Thus Rashi explained that this [assembly took place] on the day after Yom Kippur. For all the encampments were [in an atmosphere] of disagreements and complaints with the exception of the encampment before Mount Sinai, as it is said: “Israel encamped there” [in the singular]. Therefore how is it possible to assemble them at a time when they are divided [with arguments] and their mindset is not appropriate, and the time is not ripe for this?

Moses found the time that he wished. I would say it was on the day following Yom Kippur. For on Yom Kippur peace is mediated among them, and on that precise day they are all unified. Thus it

was easy to bring them together on the following day when the peace of the day before still was intact....

Then they were worthy of dwelling in one abode, that is, the Tabernacle shared by all. And after they were unified by the Tabernacle which brought them together, from then on we find that he [Moses] assembled them on a number of occasions even if [they] did not occur in the aftermath of Yom Kippur. (Kli Yakar, Exodus 35:1)

Two great enterprises in the wilderness were the receiving of Torah at Mount Sinai and the building of the Tabernacle. The Kli Yakar connects them, finding that the precondition they share is a unified spirit among the people. Only with the cessation of conflict are the people worthy and capable of receiving Torah and undertaking a great shared task. God's manifest compassionate Presence seems dependent on such an absence of internal conflict. When unity is achieved, the people are capable of their finest hours.

The ensuing narrative describing the construction of the Tabernacle is singularly free of any sign of conflict, in sharp contrast to many other episodes. In fact, the tone of the text is one of harmony across boundaries of tribe, status, age, and gender. Virtually everyone is involved in the task of building, each contributing of his or her own resources and talents. The spirit of giving is so great that Moses has to finally send a message that more than enough has been contributed to complete the Tabernacle.

The Tabernacle was to be a place shared by all of the people and a place where God's Presence could be experienced. Therefore even the process of erecting that sanctuary had to be infused with the spirit that would ideally always characterize that place. Conflict between people would stand in the way of Israel's highest achievements. Therefore the moment when peace was present, however fleeting, was the moment of a great stride forward.

פקודי PEKUDE

(Exodus 38:21-40:38)

The Tabernacle Is an Echo of Creation

And Moses saw all of the work [*melacha*], and, behold, they had done it; as the Lord had commanded, even so had they done it. And Moses blessed them. (Exodus 39:43)

It is proper to investigate why it is said at the outset [regarding the building of the Tabernacle]: “All of the work [*avoda*]” (Exodus 39:32) of the Tabernacle, the tent of meeting, was finished, and it is also said at the end: “And the people of Israel accomplished all of the work [*avoda*]” (Exodus 39:42). Why is the work called *avoda* at the outset and *melacha* at the end [in Exodus 39:43]....

In this way also the [usage] of the words [for work] *avoda* and *melacha* will be understood. For regarding the work of the Tabernacle, it is appropriate to use *avoda*, for in it they [the people] served God. *Avoda* is none other than a servant serving one’s master. But the usage *melacha* connects to the work of heaven and earth. For what a worker does for himself is called *melacha*. As it is written regarding the work of creation, “On the seventh day God completed the work [*melacha*].” And as we have found regarding the work of creation, where it is said with reference to every completed task “that it was good,” and at the end it said, “And God saw all that He had done and it was very good” – for there are those things that are good when considered each one in its own right, but when they are joined together they are not good because their unification does not go well – therefore it is said regarding the works of creation that they were good when each was considered separately, that is, a particular good. And subsequently it is said that there was in them

a collective good, for after they were all joined together, their union was good. Thus God reflected again, saying: "And God saw all that He had done and it was very good."

Similarly with reference to the work of the Tabernacle, at the outset it is said that "all of the work [*avoda*]" of the Tabernacle, the tent of meeting, was completed. And the people of Israel fully did as God had commanded Moses, meaning that the work of everyone individually was done in accordance with what God commanded Moses. Yet it was not yet explained [what transpired] after everything was complete. Then they set each completed work in its particular place for the purpose of the collective good. Therefore it [the Torah] reiterated, saying: "According to all that the Lord commanded Moses, so the children of Israel did all the work..." For there was a collective good in them that they were accomplished in the proper order, meaning the joining of all of the work together. Afterwards [the Torah] says again that all that was accomplished was done [on the model] of the commandment of the work of the worlds, of heaven and earth. Thus it is written: "Moses saw all the work [*melacha*]," that is, the work of creation, "and behold, they had done it," meaning that they had used the model of that work as though [what they were doing] was indeed that work [of creation]. Therefore "Moses blessed them." (Kli Yakar, Exodus 39:43)

The Tabernacle was the great work of the Jewish people in the wilderness. They worked together, apparently without conflict, each one volunteering his or her skills to this vast shared enterprise. It would be conceivable that what each one accomplished would be good but their individual work might not fit well with that of others in this collective work of devotional art. The Kli Yakar finds evidence however that the cumulative result was extraordinarily good. Just as the parts of God's work of creation joined in a wondrous whole, so the work of hundreds of thousands added up to a finely crafted and unified work. The use of the special word for work (*melacha*) and the statement that "Moses saw all of the work [*melacha*]" allude to the creation narrative. What the people achieved was tantamount to the work of creation itself. No wonder that Moses then blesses them just

as God had blessed the seventh day, having witnessed how well all of the elements of creation were joined in a wondrous whole (Genesis 2:3). There is little doubt that these last chapters in Exodus refer deliberately back to the first chapters of Genesis.

This great task demonstrated what a community could accomplish once they made peace with one another. The Tabernacle testifies to the potential of a human enterprise to model God's work on earth.