

Dear members and friends,

Consider this a 'derashah' to print for your Shabbat morning at home – as our Daf Yomi learners likely remember, Berakhot 7bⁱ indicates that there is a value to praying as a community in a shared time, if not a shared space. I hope you try to “come to minyan” at 9:00 AM on Shabbat morning (on time!), praying with us and learning with us.

This is uncharted territory for us all. To have our typical **community** lives undergo such drastic change means that in addition to Coronavirus concerns, we are also dealing with the shakeup of a major source of support, as our regular socialization, Torah study, and communal prayer are disrupted.

This week's parashah, as understood by Rabbi Ovadia Seforno, similarly discusses a major upheaval to our system.

Following the approach of Rashiⁱⁱ – that het ha'egel, the sin of the golden calf, completely precedes any command or conception of the Mishkan – Seforno¹ makes the compelling claim that the Mishkan is entirely a reaction on the part of God to that sin.

How so? With the sin of the golden calf, Benei Yisra'el showed that they couldn't manage without a physical manifestation and symbol of worship, and so they created one and slipped into some form of idolatry. While we received forgiveness after a long and difficult process detailed in our parashah, a later development – in what seems to be a concession to the failings we demonstrated – was the Mishkan that we read all about at length.

According to Seforno, it wasn't just the creation of a building – these developments changed our entire societal structure from what was previously planned. Before the giving of the aseret hadibrot, we were told that our destiny was to become a **מְמַלְכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ** – a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.² Most understand this as a generally beautiful phrase that describes our role as a religious light unto the nations, but Seforno says we should read the verse as simply as it sounds, that we were all meant to be priests, Kohanim! Not just one group among the Jews, but **everyone** could have been doing incredible acts of personal worship, without the need for any type of hierarchy that Humash lays out for us.

Furthermore, one should examine more closely three seemingly random mitzvot given at the end of parashat Yitro³, after the giving of the aseret hadibrot: (1) don't make images of Me in gold or silver (which seems to be a strange repetition the second commandment), (2) make for Me an altar made of earth, not cut stones, and (3) put a ramp instead of stairs on it. What is the rationale for these mitzvot? Within those verses, God states: **בְּכֹל הַמְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אֶזְכֵּיר אֶת שְׁמִי אָבוֹא אֵלָיךְ וּבְרַכְתִּיךְ**, wherever My Name is mentioned, I will come to you and bless you.

Some commentators stretch these words to be Mishkan/Mikdash-specific, claiming that they mean “wherever My Name is **[allowed to be]** mentioned...” and that the altar rules refer to the altar which will

¹ See especially his comments to Exodus 20:21, and 31:18.

² Exodus 19:6

³ Exodus 20:19-23

be in the Mishkan. Seforno, however, says we should simply take these words for what they seem to be telling us at that point in our story. God was saying, after the giving of the Torah at Sinai, 'Now go out there and worship Me! You may do so from the comfort of your own backyard – I don't want fancy gold or silver, don't try to make any likenesses of Me – I don't need that and I don't want it! Just build a basic altar of earth – keep it simple and inexpensive and make a place for My Name – that is all I want, and that is what I will turn to.'

This is what the verses simply mean, and indeed that's how things **could have been** until the golden calf. The golden calf changed everything going forward – our entire worship structure had to receive an overhaul. And so, we were given a Mishkan and the entire system that comes with it. Now, we have select Kohanim, from among the only tribe that wasn't involved in that episode of idolatry. Now, to avoid another religiously motivated spiral out of control, we need centralized worship instead of everyone having their own personal backyard altar. Now, we need to satisfy the human inclination to make things fancy for God with gold and silver, when to Him, it is all the same and the thought is what counts.

Let's not pretend that our history was meant to go in this direction all along. Bedi'avad, after the fact, after a sin like the golden calf, we can be yotzei, we can fulfill our religious obligations with a Mishkan. But bedi'avad. Now, we can learn about, aspire for and live in a world of focus on a Temple, but only because that's what we need.

The argument from the text is incredibly compelling and fascinating. But it's also depressing. It turns our holy Mishkan (and by extension, our Mikdash) into an undesirable system, a concession to our baser inclinations. There are other approaches to the Mishkan, approaches that see the instructions concerning it as preceding the sin of the golden calf, and in turn, as having an inherent and ideal value.ⁱⁱⁱ We're certainly more comfortable with that sort of an idea, and I believe that our Humash text wants us to look at the Mishkan in such a fashion, even if it may not be as accurate an accounting of how events unfolded.

Seforno's approach requires us to see Chumash as being written in an order that is not chronological. But this begs the question – what is the order to how it is written? Apparently, it is conceptual – ideas are meant to be presented in an order by which God can best communicate to us how we need to frame matters. In that sense, we are being told to frame the new system of worshipping God, the Mishkan, as the ideal system for our people, as if it was part of the plan all along. That may not be the historical case, but when it comes to a relationship with God, it is the only way to look at how we can continue to develop religiously. The episode of the calf taught us something about ourselves. No doubt it was a sin, and one that required intense teshuvah, but teshuvah doesn't always mean we push a full reset button. Teshuvah is a return to one's self and then seeing how going forward, things need to be approached not just with stronger resolve, but differently. In that sense, the Mishkan – for us – becomes a new lekhatilah, a new context that is the best one for who we are as a people.

I know, the analogy is not perfect. We certainly don't want what's happening now to become the 'new normal', and we hope that our regular community lives can be restored soon. However, I would advise that we see this shock to our system, at least temporarily, as an opportunity – as a lekhatilah chance to look at our lives and activities in ways that we don't otherwise get a chance to.

How? A few suggestions:

- First, think about why we are limiting our interactions with each other. For those that are healthy and younger, this is not something which is likely to be a direct threat. Turning our routines upside-down is not about us, but about those more vulnerable, whom we know more reckless actions will ultimately have cascading effects on. We're doing this for them and for the nurses, doctors, and hospitals who need our help in keeping this crisis manageable. It's an amazing act of social solidarity, and I hope that in isolation, when we feel so disconnected, that these steps will reinforce how truly connected we all are.
- For those that are more at risk (and to some degree, that's all of us), not attending services or engaging in other religious activity can also be very difficult. This too requires a reframing, such that staying home is an inherently religious experience – I hope the following 'tefillah before eating hametz on Pesah', written in Bergen-Belsen by Rabbi Aharon Davids⁴, can give some perspective:

"Heavenly Father, it is manifest and known to You that we desire to carry out your will in regard to the commandment of eating matzah, and strictly refraining from chametz on the Festival of Pesach. But we are sick at heart at being prevented in this by reason of the oppression and mortal danger in which we find ourselves. We stand ready to perform Your commandments of which it is said, **"You shall do them and live by them,"** (Vayikra 18:5) that is to say, **you shall live by them and not die by them.** And accordingly we heed Your warning, as it is written: **"Take heed to thyself and keep thy soul alive."** (Devarim 4:9) Therefore we beseech You that You will keep us in life and establish us and redeem us speedily from our servitude so that we may in time come to perform Your statutes and carry out Your will with a perfect heart. Amen."

Our minds may try to depress us with thoughts that we are bereft of mitzvot – don't fall into that trap. Taking care of ourselves is a mitzvah, and one of the most important ones that we have. We need to remind ourselves of this often and thank God for the opportunity to do so.

- It hangs upon the wall of my office, and you've heard me quote this before, but certainly not in this context. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch once remarked as follows⁵:

"If I had the power, I would provisionally close all synagogues for a hundred years. Do not tremble at the thought of it, Jewish heart. What would happen? Jews and Jewesses without synagogues, desiring to remain such, would be forced to concentrate on a Jewish life and a Jewish home. The Jewish officials connected with the synagogue would have to look to the only opportunity now open to them - to teach young and old how to live a Jewish life and how to build a Jewish home. All synagogues closed by Jewish hands would constitute the strongest protest against the abandonment of the Torah in home and life."

He certainly didn't mean for it to happen like this, but the opportunity is still an opportunity. Our world can sometimes get a bit too "shul-centric", a bit too focused on the public manifestations of religious devotion at the expense of the more private internal work that makes for true meaningful living. On that note, don't see this as time in which you are 'stuck at home', but as time in which you get to stay home, learn more about your spouse, your children, and/or yourself. Take the time to pray a little slower and learn some more, free from many of the distractions that often compete with such efforts. Bring Torah back to 'home and life'. We will be working on creating online opportunities for us to meaningfully

⁴ <http://ou.org.s3.amazonaws.com/publications/ja/5761spring/storyofprayer.pdf>

⁵ See Dayan Isidore Grunfeld's introduction to Horeb, page lxix

connect to each other despite our necessary distance – consider taking part in these, even if you haven't been a 'regular' until now. And avail yourself of the many generous disseminators of Torah online, some of whom have made their resources free during this difficult period.⁶

- Lastly – and this is the most difficult one – this is an opportunity to be there for each other like never before. Loneliness is its own epidemic⁷, and it's one we have to fight, without exaggeration, as strongly as Coronavirus. I don't believe anything can truly replace face-to-face interactions, but our world has given us so many tools to, at least quantitatively-speaking, fill this breach. On that note, make sure you regularly reach out to many others by phone, text, email, and video – it will be good for them and good for you to maintain and even strengthen social connections as we all become more acutely aware of this very real challenge that our modern world – even without Coronavirus – faces. Loneliness and the depression that can come with it are real issues, and if this period will sensitize us to that, perhaps that can drive us to build an even better community going forward.

Shabbat shalom – best wishes for us all to recover, and to be successful in keeping ourselves and others healthy.

אמר ליה רבי יצחק לרב נחמן: מאי טעמא לא אתי מר לבי כנישתא לצלוני? אמר ליה: לא יכילנא. אמר ליה: לכנפי למרⁱ עשרה וליצלי. אמר ליה: טריסא לי מלתא. ולימא ליה מר לשלוחא דצבורא, בעידנא דמצלי צבורא ליתי ולודעיה למר. אמר ליה מאי כולי האי? אמר ליה דאמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי שמעון בן יוחי: מאי דכתיב "ואני תפילתי לך ה' עת רצון". אימתי עת רצון בשעה שהצבור מתפללין —.

Rabbi Yitzhak said to Rav Nahman: Why did the Master not come to the synagogue to pray? Rav Nahman said to him: I was weak and unable to come. Rabbi Yitzhak said to him: Let the Master gather ten individuals, a prayer quorum, at your home and pray. Rav Nahman said to him: It is difficult for me to impose upon the members of the community to come to my home to pray with me (Sefer Mitzvot Gadol). Rabbi Yitzhak suggested another option: The Master should tell the congregation to send a messenger when the congregation is praying to come and inform the Master so you may pray at the same time. Rav Nahman saw that Rabbi Yitzhak was struggling to find a way for him to engage in communal prayer. He asked: What is the reason for all this fuss? Rabbi Yitzhak said to him: As Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai: What is the meaning of that which is written: "But as for me, let my prayer be unto You, Lord, in a time of favor; O God, in the abundance of Your mercy, answer me with the truth of Your salvation" (Psalms 69:14)? It appears that the individual is praying that his prayers will coincide with a special time of Divine favor. When is a time of favor? It is at the time when the congregation is praying. It is beneficial to pray together with the congregation, for God does not fail to respond to the entreaties of the congregation.

[While this could be limited to someone praying at the same time a minyan elsewhere, I think there is merit to extending the concept to this context as well.]

ⁱⁱ To Exodus 31:38:

אין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה. מעשה העגל קודם לצווי מלאכת המשכן ימים רבים היה
There is no "earlier" or "later" in the Torah. [Here, too], the event of the Calf preceded the command regarding the work of the Tabernacle by many days.

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, Nahmanides to Exodus 25:1

⁶ See, for example <https://www.alephbeta.org/>, and <https://torahlive.com/> who are making their subscription services free.

⁷ <https://www.hrsa.gov/enews/past-issues/2019/january-17/loneliness-epidemic>

כאשר דבר השם עם ישראל פנים בפנים עשרת הדברות, וצוה אותם על ידי משה קצת מצות שהם כמו אבות למצותיה של תורה, כאשר הנהיגו רבותינו עם הגרים שבאים להתיהד, וישראל קבלו עליהם לעשות כל מה שיצום על ידו של משה, וקרת עמהם ברית על כל זה, מעתה הנה הם לו לעם והוא להם לאלקים כאשר התנה עמהם מתחלה ועתה אם שמוע תשמעו בקולי ושמרתם את בריתי והייתם לי סגולה (לעיל יט ה), ואמר ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש (שם ו), והנה הם קדושים ראויים שיהיה בהם מקדש להשרות שכינתו ביניהם. ולכן צוה תחלה על דבר המשכן שיהיה לו בית בתוכם מקודש לשמו, ושם ידבר עם משה ויצוה את בני ישראל. והנה עקר החפץ במשכן הוא מקום מנוחת השכינה שהוא הארון, כמו שאמר (להלן כה כב) ונועדתי לך שם ודברתי אתך מעל הכפרת, על כן הקדים הארון והכפרת בכאן כי הוא מוקדם במעלה... וסוד המשכן הוא, שיהיה הכבוד אשר שכן על הר סיני שוכן עליו בנסתר. וכמו שנאמר שם (לעיל כד טז) וישכן כבוד ה' על הר סיני, וכתוב (דברים ה כא) הן הראנו ה' אלקינו את כבודו ואת גדלו, כן כתוב במשכן וכבוד ה' מלא את המשכן (להלן מ לד). והזכיר במשכן שני פעמים וכבוד ה' מלא את המשכן, כנגד "את כבודו ואת גדלו". והיה במשכן תמיד עם ישראל הכבוד שנראה להם בהר סיני. ובבא משה אליו הדבור אשר נדבר לו בהר סיני. וכמו שאמר במתן תורה (דברים ד לו) מן השמים השמיעך את קולו ליסרך ועל הארץ הראך את אשו הגדולה, כך במשכן כתוב (במדבר ז פט) וישמע את הקול מדבר אליו מעל הכפרת מבין שני הכרובים וידבר אליו. ונכפל "וידבר אליו" להגיד מה שאמר בקבלה שיהיה הקול בא מן השמים אל משה מעל הכפרת ומשם מדבר עמו, כי כל דבור עם משה היה מן השמים ביום ונשמע מבין שני הכרובים, כדרך ודבריו שמעת מתוך האש (דברים ד לו), ועל כן היו שניהם זהב. וכן אמר הכתוב (להלן כט מב מג) אשר אועד לכם שמה לדבר אליך שם ונקדש בכבודי, כי שם יהיה בית מועד לדבור ונקדש בכבודי:

Now that G-d had told Israel face to face (Deuteronomy 5:4) the Ten Commandments, and had further commanded them through Moses some of the precepts which are like general principles to the [individual] commandments of the Torah – in the same way that our Rabbis were accustomed to deal with strangers who come to be converted to the Jewish faith – and now that the Israelites accepted upon themselves to do all that he would command them through Moses and He made a covenant with them concerning all this, from now on they are His people and He is their G-d. This is in accordance with the condition He made with them at the beginning: Now, therefore, if ye will indeed hearken unto My voice, and keep My covenant, then Ye shall be Mine own treasure, (19:5) and He said further: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. (19:6) They are now holy, in that they are worthy that there be amongst them a Sanctuary through which He makes His Divine Glory dwell among them. Therefore He first commanded concerning the Tabernacle, so that He have amongst them a house dedicated to His name, from where He would speak with Moses and command the children of Israel. Thus the main purpose of the Tabernacle was to contain a place in which the Divine Glory rests, this being the ark, just as He said, And there will I meet with thee, and I will speak with thee from above the ark-cover. (25:22) Therefore he first gave the commandment about the ark and the ark-cover, for they are first in importance...

The secret of the Tabernacle is that the Glory which abode upon Mount Sinai [openly] should abide upon it in a concealed manner. For just as it is said there, And the glory of the Eternal abode upon Mount Sinai, (24:16) and it is further written, Behold, the Eternal our G-d hath shown us His glory and His greatness, (Deuteronomy 5:21) so it is written of the Tabernacle, and the glory of the Eternal filled the Tabernacle. (40:34) Twice is the verse, and the glory of the Eternal filled the Tabernacle (40:34) mentioned in connection with the Tabernacle, to correspond with His glory and His greatness. Thus Israel always had with them in the Tabernacle the Glory which appeared to them on Mount Sinai. And when Moses went into the Tabernacle, he would hear the Divine utterance being spoken to him in the same way as on Mount Sinai. Thus just as it is said at the Giving of the Torah: Out of heaven He made thee to hear His voice, that He might instruct thee; and upon earth He made thee to see His great fire, (Deuteronomy 4:36) so it is written of the Tabernacle, and he heard the voice speaking unto him from above the ark-cover... from between the two cherubim; and He spoke unto him. (Numbers 7:89) The expression "speaking unto him" is mentioned here twice in order to indicate that which the Rabbis have said in the Tradition (Bamidbar Rabbah 14:22) that the Voice would come from heaven to Moses from upon the ark-cover, and from there He spoke with him; for every Divine utterance with Moses came from Heaven during daytime, and was heard from between the two cherubim, (Numbers 7:89) similar to what is said, and thou didst hear His words out of the midst of the fire. (Deuteronomy 4:36) It is for this reason that the two cherubim were made of gold. And Scripture so states: where I will meet with you, to speak there unto thee; (29:42) and it shall be sanctified by My glory, (29:43) for there [in the Tabernacle] will be the appointed place for the Divine utterance, and it will be sanctified by My glory. (29:43)