

Parsha: Vayekhel-Pekudei

Brick by brick.

Parashat "Vayekhel - Pekudei (Shemot/Exodus) 35:1 - 40:38"

When my fifth-grade teacher returned from a goodwill trip to China, she made a typical Chinese meal for her class, and told us stories of what she'd seen and the people she'd met. One story that stayed in my heart was her description of how typical villagers would prepare for a wedding. You see, in many of the small rural communities that she had visited, people lived in deep poverty and resources had to be carefully set aside years in advance. Some families would actually set aside bricks, stacked up in a corner of their yard, each year as their child grew up. Then, when the child became engaged, they would use these bricks to build the new couple a simple home. It struck me that they would make such tangible preparations so early in life—that they were so focused already on a wedding date set far in the future.

Love and anticipation kept the event in sharp focus

The narrative of Jewish history tells a similar tale. When the Jewish nation was still very, very young, we began setting aside materials for our own marital home. Our forefather Jacob arrived in Egypt and quickly planted trees for constructing the Tabernacle, the place where G-d would dwell together with us in a more intimate, revealed way than anywhere else on earth. Our wedding was still hundreds of years, and hundreds of miles, away, but love and anticipation kept the event in sharp focus.

For weeks now, we've been reading in the weekly Torah portions about the culmination of efforts that began with the planting of those trees in Egypt. We read how we were taken out of Egypt, made it to our wedding canopy on Mount Sinai and then received instructions for how to properly construct a home for G-d, who is metaphorically referred to as the husband of the Jewish people. This week we experience the final stages in establishing our home: Moses has finally given over to the Jewish people the instructions he has received from G-d, and then the Tabernacle is built.

The Torah describes it as a labor of love. “Every man whose heart motivated him, whose spirit inspired him to give ... ” (Exodus 35:21). The detailed work involved in constructing not only the actual building, but the elaborate vessels that would be used in it, the woven tapestries that would cover it, and the clothing worn by those who served in it, was an expression of the inner commitment of each individual Jew to G-d.

The two portions that describe this, Vayak’hel and Pekudei (which in many years are indeed read as a single portion), are a kind of call and response—a two-part love song between the Jews and G-d. As happens in any healthy, normal relationship, the outpouring of true commitment and affection embodied in our efforts elicited a response from G-d.

“The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of G-d filled the Tabernacle ... For the cloud of G-d would be on the Tabernacle by day, and fire would be on it at night ... ” (Exodus 40:34, 38)

Homes aren’t built in a day

The cloud of glory and fire that rested on the Tabernacle were manifestations of G-d revealing Himself to us. This was one of the greatest expressions of love and intimacy we could possibly receive from Him.

Actually, G-d reveals Himself in this world all the time, but not in a way that we readily see Him. Instead, what we see is a (relatively) small sampling of His capabilities. The millions of species that exist, the broad range of colors, sounds, smells, tastes, even the emotions that we experience, together with all the other details of existence—all communicate to us details about G-d’s desire and, for lack of a better word, His talents. But they still don’t communicate Him.

Yet there is another, less tangible way (for most of us, at least) that G-d reveals Himself in this world, and though less tangible, it is the basis for our existence. This is the Divine energy or light referred to in Chassidut as *sovev kol almin*—the Transcendent Light. Like an idea whose brilliance we aren’t yet ready to grasp, it seems to hover just beyond reach. Yet in a moment of cosmic clarity, it can suddenly be manifest in this world.

That's what happened when we made the Tabernacle and anointed it. Suddenly, it was filled with the remarkable glory of G-d.

This light which, for most of our lives, is beyond our grasp is the very source of our life, the conduit through which G-d re-creates each and every one of us every nanosecond of our lives. As such, it is actually an expression of the deepest level of our relationship with and dependence on G-d, yet we are so much less conscious of it than we are of the less intense, more intimate light that animates this world in an obvious way.

But the lesson of these Torah readings on building the Tabernacle is also an instruction in how we can sensitize ourselves to this light in our everyday lives. The Tabernacle is a microcosm of the world itself, indeed of man himself, and when we likewise turn our self into a dwelling place for G-d, we may just catch a glimpse beyond what meets the eye, and succeed in making that transcendent light a little more revealed in the world around us.

But like the Chinese villagers, we need to realize that homes aren't built in a day. It takes years of carefully adding to our resources, of acquiring the necessary bricks of knowledge and good deeds. But if we stay focused on the goal, we just might succeed in making Him feel at home.