

Pikudei: The Kedusha of our Work, and of Our Weeks

Rav said: A worker may quit, even in the middle of the day. . . as it is written "the children of Israel are [God's] servants and not servants to servants." (Leviticus 25:42) (TB Bava Kama 116 b)

דכתיב: (ויקרא כ"ה) "כי לי בני ישראל עבדים", ולא עבדים לעבדים.

We are God's servants, all week long.

I'd like to address two points this Shabbat morning as we bring the building of the mishkan, B'nai Yisrael's sanctuary to house God's immanent presence, to a close in parashat Pikudei. Both issues have to do with the kedusha, the sanctity, of the process of building the mishkan, and both point the way toward the kedusha of the sanctuaries, both literal and figurative, that we spend our lives building.

Point number one is that, over the course of the past 4 weeks, we have read about every step in the construction process. B'nai Yisrael's process is completely transparent.

In Parashat Bo, we find out how the Israelites acquire the raw materials that they later use to build the sanctuary -- the Egyptians hand them to B'nai Yisrael as the Israelites depart Egypt. Gold, silver and other valuable materials. Should B'nai Yisrael have accepted these departure gifts? That's a moral question, not quite on par with but at least in the same ballpark as the question of post-Holocaust reparations. But at least we understand from the text that the construction materials aren't acquired through imperialist plunder or outright military aggression, as has so often been the case with natural resources in the modern world.

Parashat Teruma and Titzaveh tell us of the executive planning to use B'nai Yisrael's resources to build the mishkan. Last week, in parashat Vayakhel, B'nai Yisrael begin to execute the plan -- contributing the raw materials in abundance, gathering the skilled labor and artisanry to transform the materials into the components of the mishkan, and then actually building the components. This week, in Pikudei, the skilled work force assembles the components and Moses anoints the mishkan before it opens for business.

There are potential moral hazards all along the food chain of the construction of the mishkan. That's why the torah is transparent concerning every step. *Building the mishkan is work at its ideal, a model for the rest of work with which we occupy our lives. As the mishkan is to be an immanent residence for God, the process of building it also needs to reflect God and represent B'nai Yisrael's best efforts to walk in God's ways.*

Unfortunately, as I alluded to, most production that goes on in the world does not meet this ideal, and is not nearly as transparent. The moral hazards are everywhere, and are invisible to us unless we explore more deeply.

Think about the production of a simple t-shirt, for example. We're just there at the buying end, making decisions, typically, based on price and quality, without moral considerations or consideration of what brought the t-shirt to the rack. Without factoring in the answers to very important questions.

Who grows the cotton? Who picks it? How much do they work and how much are they paid? How much money lines the pockets of the agri-farms? How old -- or rather, how young -- are the workers who manufacture the cotton into t-shirts? How much are they paid? What are the conditions in which they work? Do the people have democratic

rights in those countries and the rights to organize to better their situations? And those who sell the t-shirt? Do the salespeople get health insurance? Do they maintain two jobs to pay the bills? Do their kids get proper care when they work those two jobs? Whose bank accounts are we supporting when we purchase discount materials? How best can we support these salespeople? Back down the line, do we have a special responsibility to support American workers and production?

There are so many questions to answer, and so few do we even consider. But consider them we must, if we value the kedusha of work and production and determine to bring to them the same ideals the Israelites brought to the archetypal work of building the mishkan.

Point number two, which reinforces the first. The building of the mishkan, this most sacred of activities, takes place during the week, not on Shabbat. B'nai Yisrael, implored repeatedly to mark the kedusha, holiness, of time with Shabbat, recreate that kedusha during the week with activity. Likewise, lest we feel that the content of our week plays second fiddle to Shabbat, the rabbis later embed the work activities involved in the building of the mishkan as the very definition of work, *milacha*. They defined as work the foundational activities -- both routine and extraordinary, brutish and crafty, all carefully planned and executed -- of building an infrastructure, not the operation of the infrastructure and the sacrificial offerings. The rabbis set a very high bar for us.

The challenge of our weekday remains the same as on Shabbat -- to manifest God's presence in the world. Yet without the benefit of Shabbat and its inherent kedusha, we must ramp up our consciousness of the kedusha of our activities during *yimei chol*, the other days of the week, to fulfill this mission. We celebrate Shabbat and experience its kedusha in part to refresh ourselves for the holy pursuits of our week.

We are all building sanctuaries during the days of our week -- both in our work and personal lives. Like B'nai Yisrael, we are all involved in our own ways. In ways small and large. Whether we work in the for-profit or non-profit venue. Whether we are in helping professions or not. Whether through communal commitments, responsibilities toward family and friends, or the *menschlichkeit* of our behavior with strangers. There are big questions to consider:

- Do we consider ourselves to be builders of sanctuaries of holiness in our daily lives?
- If not, how do we change our mindsets to view the activities of our weeks in this way?
- If yes, how can we increase our *kavana*, our intentionality, so that it permeates even more of our daily activities?
- How do we carry our consciousness internally so that we don't wear the consciousness on our sleeves, in ways that can be off-putting to others?

With the building of the *mishkan*, B'nai Yisrael comes out smelling like roses. They rise to the sacred activity and produce, with *kavana* and great integrity, a place worthy of God's continued presence. Restraining from doing these things on Shabbat recharges their focus and creativity for their massive task.

The question for us is, do we, and can we, do the same? How do we work and conduct our daily activities? Do we value and prioritize the moral integrity of the way we work and produce? And for what do we ultimately do the activities of our week? To maintain ourselves, certainly and importantly. But to build sanctuaries of God's presence? This is a very Jewish goal.