



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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בס"ד

פקודי תש"ף
Pekudei 5780

**The Blessed
Power of
Order**



PARSHAT PEKUDEI IN A NUTSHELL

In *parshat Pekudei*, we complete the reading of the book of Shemot, but the story doesn't come to an end. Moshe says that all the donations given should be counted, and the people should record, in detail, how these contributions are each used. The priestly garments are made and Moshe finally sets up the Mishkan. Once this is completed, the Mishkan becomes filled with the glory of the Hashem.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do you think the Torah goes into such detail about the contributions of the people to the Mishkan?



THE CORE IDEA

The Question: *Pekudei* – in fact the whole series of chapters beginning with *Teruma* and *Tetzaveh* and finishing with *Vayak'hel* and *Pekudei* – is an extraordinary way for the book of Shemot to end. The rest of the book is a stormy story of the Israelites' exile and enslavement and the confrontation between the ruler of Egypt and the man he may have grown up with in the palace, Moshe, now the leader of the Hebrew slaves. It is about the most dramatic Divine intervention in history, a story of signs and wonders, miracles and deliverances. Nature itself is overturned as a people fleeing from persecution cross a sea on dry land while the chariots of Pharaoh's army are stuck fast in the mud. It is the world's most famous story of freedom. Films have been made of it. Many oppressed people have based their hopes on it.

Its natural culmination should surely have been chapters 19–24: the revelation of God at Mount Sinai, the covenant between God and the people, the Ten Commandments and the civil laws that followed. This is surely where the story has been heading all along: the formalisation of a relationship that would bind God to a people and a people to God, bringing heaven down to earth and lifting a people from earth to heaven.

How can this long story of the construction of the Mishkan possibly be relevant, told first in *Terumah* and *Tetzaveh* as God's command to Moshe, and in *Vayakhel* and *Pekudei* as Moshe's command to the people and a description of how they carried it out? It has nothing to do with miracles. It seems to have nothing to do with freedom. The chief actor in these chapters is not God but the people who bring the contributions and Betzalel, the master craftsman, and those who work with him, including the women who spun goats' hair into cloth, brought gifts, and gave their mirrors for the bronze washbasin. Most of the narrative reads as if it belongs to *Sefer Vayikra*, the book of holiness, rather than *Sefer Shemot*, the book of freedom.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Have you previously heard any answers to this question, or do you have your own answer?
2. If the main actors in the story are humans and not God, do you think this makes the story more or less important?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Michael was learning about the Ten Commandments with his class in school when his teacher, Miss Sharon, explained that just as Hashem gave us special rules to live our life by, so we have rules in school and in other places in our lives.

"Can you think of any rules in our class?" asked Miss Sharon. A few of Michael's friends put up their hands to answer, but Michael just sat there looking grumpy.

"You shouldn't hit anyone," Julie answered. "You have to help at clean-up time!" said Rachel. "You mustn't stand on the furniture." added Sam.

Miss Sharon turned to Michael and asked him if everything was ok. "I don't like rules," Michael replied with a frown. "It would be much more fun in school if we didn't have them."

"Ok then, Michael, let's try it tomorrow with no rules," said Miss Sharon with a smile, and all the children whooped with excitement.

The next morning Michael ran into class with a big smile, excited for the day ahead, until he tripped over Julie's backpack that was lying on the floor. "Sorry!" called Julie from across the room. "But there are no rules today!"

Michael rubbed his ankle and shrugged, and went to the puzzle table to begin playing, but Rachel grabbed one of the pieces before he could finish the puzzle. "Hey, I need that!" cried Michael, but Rachel ran away calling over her shoulder, "No rules today, remember?"

Then for Show and Tell Michael tried to show his friends his new toy dinosaur, but none of his friends would listen. "It's my turn now, you have to be quiet" Michael demanded. "No we don't," said David, "because there are no rules today!"

At snack time, Jonah playfully grabbed some of Michael's crackers without asking. Michael didn't say anything, because there were no rules today... but he was upset.

"What's wrong, Michael?" asked Miss Sharon gently. "I thought having no rules would be fun and mean I could do whatever I wanted," said Michael, "but I haven't been able to do anything I wanted to do today... I guess rules are important. Rules show people how to care about each other."

"You're absolutely right!" said Miss Sharon with a kind smile. "That's why Hashem gave us the Torah, and that's why we have rules here at school."

"Can we go back to having rules tomorrow, Miss Sharon?" asked Michael. "How about right now?!" replied Miss Sharon.

Adapted from the story "No Rules for Michael" written by Sylvia A. Rouss.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What would life be like without rules?
2. Why can't people just know how to treat each other, without needing rules to show them?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The Torah is telling us something profound that is still relevant today, but to understand it we must approach it in stages. The first fascinating fact is that the Torah uses very similar language to describe the Israelites' creation of the Mishkan and God's creation of the universe. This is how the Torah describes the completion of the Mishkan:

So all the *work* on the Mishkan, the Tent of Meeting, was **completed**. The Israelites did everything just as the Lord commanded Moshe.... Moshe inspected the **work** and saw that they had done it just as the Lord had commanded. So Moshe **blessed** them. (Shemot 39:32, 43)

And this is how the Torah describes the conclusion of the creation of the universe:

The heavens and the earth were **completed** in all their vast array. On the seventh day God finished the **work** He had been doing; so on the seventh day He rested from all His **work**. Then God **blessed** the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all the *work* of creating that He had done. (Bereishit 2:1-3)

Three key words appear in both passages: "**work**," "**completed**," and "**blessed**." These verbal echoes are not accidental. They are how the Torah signals intertextuality, that is, hinting that one law or story is to be read in the context of another. In this case the Torah is emphasising that *Sefer Shemot* ends as *Sefer Bereishit* began, with a work of creation. Note the difference as well as the similarity. *Sefer Bereishit* began with an act of *Divine* creation. *Sefer Shemot* ends with an act of *human* creation.

The closer we examine the two texts, the more we see how intricately the parallel has been constructed. The creation account in *Sefer Bereishit* is tightly organised around a series of sevens. There are seven days of creation. The word "good" appears seven times, the word "God" thirty-five times, and the word "earth" twenty-one times. The opening verse of *Sefer Bereishit* contains seven words, the second fourteen, and the three concluding verses thirty-five words. The complete text is 469 (7×67) words.

The account of the construction of the Mishkan in *Vayakhel-Pekudei* is similarly built around the number seven. The word “heart” appears seven times in *Sefer Shemot* 35:5–29, as Moshe specifies the materials to be used in the construction, and seven times again in 35:34–36:8, the description of how the craftsmen Betzalel and Oholiav were to carry out the work. The word *terumah*, “contribution” appears seven times in this section. In chapter 39, describing the making of the priestly vestments, the phrase “as God commanded Moshe” occurs seven times. It occurs again seven times in chapter 40.

So, first conclusion: The language and construction of the two passages is meant to direct us to a comparison. *The Israelites’ creation of the Mishkan was a counterpart of God’s creation of the universe.* But how? How compare a tiny building with the entire universe? And how compare the assembly of pre-existing materials with the Divine creation of something from nothing?

We need another step. The first chapter of *Sefer Bereishit* describes God creating a universe of order. “God said, Let there be ... and there was ... and God saw that it was good.” For the first three days He created domains: day and night, upper and lower waters, and sea and dry land. On the next three days He placed the appropriate objects or life forms in each domain: the sun, moon and stars, birds and fish, animals and humans. At the end of the sixth day we read, “God saw all that He had made, and it was very good,” meaning, each element was good in itself and they were in a balanced relationship with one another. The entire account exudes harmony. In the beginning, God created order.

Then He created humans and they created chaos: first Adam and Eve, then Cain, then the generation of the Flood, to the point at which the Torah tells us that God regretted that He had created humanity on earth (*Bereishit* 6). The story of the opening chapters of *Sefer Bereishit* is thus the descent from order to chaos.

We now begin to see what the Mishkan really was. It was a *tikkun*, a mending, of the sin of the Golden Calf. The Torah says relatively little about the calf but a great deal about the Israelites’ behaviour. First, they gathered menacingly against Aharon, who seems to have been fearing for his life. Then, once the calf had been made, they ate and drank and rose “to engage in revelry.” When Moshe came down the mountain he saw the people “running wild, for Aharon had let them run beyond control and become a laughingstock to their enemies.” This is a portrait of chaos. Order had completely broken down. The people had allowed themselves to be swept up, first by fear, then by frenzied celebration.

The *tikkun* for chaos is order. The Mishkan, with its precisely delineated dimensions and materials, put together from the voluntary contributions of the people, fashioned by a craftsman under Divine inspiration, was just that: a microcosm of pure order.

So the end of *Sefer Shemot* is not quite an echo of the beginning of *Sefer Bereishit*: it is an antidote to it. If humanity can reduce God’s order to chaos, then humanity must show that it can rescue order from chaos. That is the journey the Israelites must take from the Golden Calf to the making of the Mishkan. We can travel from chaos to order.

The Golden Calf was the ill-judged, unplanned, chaotic answer to the genuine question the Israelites were asking: What shall we do, here in the middle of the wilderness, without Moshe to act as our intermediary with God? The Mishkan was the real answer. It was the enduring sign that the Divine Presence was in their midst, even without a prophet like Moshe. In fact, once the Mishkan was completed and dedicated, Moshe had no further role within it. Its service was led not by prophets but by priests. Priests are masters of order.

The Mishkan, the Temple, and the synagogue, different though they are, were in place what Shabbat is in time. They all represent an ideal realm of order, the way God wanted our world to be. Entering them we step out of the social world with its conflicts and strife, hostilities and injustices, and find ourselves under the wings of the Divine Presence, sensing the harmony of the heavens and the cleansing of the spirit when we come to atone for our sins or offer thanks for our blessings. This is where we can always find God’s indwelling spirit. This is the antidote to the travesty we so often make of God’s world.

There is another reality. **I believe that sacred time, Shabbat, and sacred space, the Mishkan/Temple/synagogue, are where the restless soul finds rest; where hearts open and minds soar; where we know we are part of something larger than this time, this place; where if we listen we can hear the song creation sings to its Creator; where we bring our sins and failings to God and are cleansed; where we sense that life has an order we must learn to honour; and where God is close – not at the top of a mountain but here in our midst. There must be a time and place where we recognise that not all is chaos. That is why Exodus ends with the Mishkan. Freedom exists where order rules.**

QUESTION TO PONDER:

What do Shabbat and the Mishkan have in common here?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*The world is a place in which God creates order, but humanity has a tendency to create chaos. That is why we need law, lawyers, police, courts and judges. Central to the biblical vision is an ordered Universe where everything has its integrity and place. Hence the significance of (moral) boundaries. The reason why God tells Adam and Eve not to eat from one of the trees in the Garden of Eden is to establish that even in paradise there are boundaries. Insights from the Bible into the Concept of Criminal Justice, in *The Power of Ideas*, p. 267*



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Where else in Judaism can we see a focus on order?
2. Is there also room for spontaneity in Judaism?
3. How can we make order from chaos in our lives and in the world as a whole?



EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. The Torah cares about our contributions. It focuses on the details to show the people in a good light, noting how generously they gave and how committed to this national project they were – it was important to them to actively help to build a Sanctuary for the worship of God. This was clearly in contrast with their behaviour surrounding the Golden Calf incident. God is interested in a partnership in redeeming the world, and if the Mishkan represents order in the world as an antidote to the chaos created by humankind (as Rabbi Sacks argues in this week's *Covenant & Conversation*) then it is important that the people partner in its creation, and this was their contribution.

THE CORE IDEA

1. The question here is, why does the Torah pause the narrative (which should continue with the Israelites travelling to the Promised Land) and spend chapters describing the building of the Mishkan? The classic answer is this is the “*tikkun*” (antidote or fix) to the story of the Golden Calf. There are other ways of finding meaning in these chapters and the place we find them, including the idea Rabbi Sacks shares here.
2. The fact that God is not the main actor in this section of the Torah makes sense if the Mishkan is a *tikkun* for the Golden Calf (the people need to fix the mess they have created) and this also is an appropriate approach in the context of the message of this week's *Covenant & Conversation*, which suggests that it is humankind who creates chaos, and the Mishkan represents the order necessary to fix this. It is fitting that it is the people who create the order that is a response to the chaos they have created.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. As we saw in the story, the answer to this question is chaos! The Torah notes that the chaos of a society with no rules (in the story of the Flood) was the reason God wanted to destroy the entire world.
2. The early stories of *Sefer Bereishit* illustrate that humankind cannot be relied on to create a just society based on fairness where the weak have the same rights as the strong. This is why every society has some sort of rules and legal system to ensure that its members are moral and everyone has freedom and is protected.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Both Shabbat and the Mishkan have many intricate laws associated with them. They both parallel the original Creation, and are ways that people can create their own order from the chaos of the outside world. They are both a calm oasis protecting us from the chaos of the everyday outside world (the synagogue as an outgrowth of the Mishkan/Beit HaMikdash can function in this way and also has a focus on details and order).

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Judaism is a religion of details. It is a religion of practice and law. The system of halacha is highly detail oriented providing a clear and ordered framework for moral and spiritual living. There is also a clear weekly and annual rhythm of Jewish living in the form of Shabbat and the *chagim*. The prayerbook itself is called a *siddur* which means order, giving Jews an order through which to channel their devotion and service of God. By following Judaism, Jews are given an ordered framework in which to experience a world that can often be full of disorder.
2. But at the same time Judaism is a religion of love and spirituality, and these often need to be given space for individual expression. So even within a highly structured approach to prayer (with many intricate laws and a well-ordered prayer service and prayerbook) there are opportunities for spontaneous spirituality. There are also schools of Jewish philosophy that focus more on spiritual spontaneity, such as Hassidism. Judaism tries to provide a balance between the two approaches.
3. Judaism as a belief system, and as a practical way of life, creates order for us in a world of disorder. Judaism also expects of us to show responsibility in redeeming the world, by making order from the chaos through working to build just societies where everyone has equal rights to a life of freedom.