

International Rabbinic Fellowship

Weekly Dvar Torah

Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei

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This week's Dvar Torah is provided by Rabbi Steven Exler, Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

One gets the best first sense of Parshiyot Vayakhel-Pekudei by looking at the pages of a Chumash printed together with the legendary 11th century French commentary of Rashi. Usually armed with wisdom on every verse, and multiple comments per verse, Rashi is strikingly absent for pages as one turns through the text of our double parashah. In Chapter 37, Rashi only comments on the first verse, leaving the other 28 as if there were nothing to say about these whole sections of Torah! Indeed, our parshiyot mostly tell us of phases of transmission and actualization of the commands to construct the Tabernacle and fashion its ornaments and the priests' clothes, things which we encountered in Parshiyot Terumah and Tetzaveh as listeners when God commanded them to Mosheh initially. After narrating the commands to Mosheh initially, why does the Torah record the transmission of Mosheh to Bnei Yisrael of much of these mandates, and their execution?

On a lighter note, perhaps one of the only things as repetitive as this passage in the Torah is this very question about these parshiyot! It occupies many commentaries and is certainly the "FAQ" on this parashah. I hope to offer a new angle, or at least new texts, towards this discussion.

One of the noteworthy repetitive phrases within this repetitive section is the phrase "*ka'asher tzivah Adonai et Mosheh*", "as God commanded Mosheh", which appears 8 times (and twice more in variant forms) in Chapter 39, the

penultimate chapter of our book of Exodus. Thus we have a nearly infinitely regressing repetition. The record itself of the faithful transmission and execution demonstrates that everything was done as God commanded Mosheh, and then the text repeats over and over that this was done as God commanded Mosheh.

The Or ha-Hayyim (R' Hayyim ibn Attar, 18th century Morocco) discusses this repetition at length, and offers a number of thought-provoking suggestions. Among them, he suggests that as the builders were building the Tabernacle, vessel by vessel, and fashioning the priestly garments, garment by garment, they actually said aloud, "we are doing this in accordance with how God commanded Mosheh." In this interpretation, as we read these verses, we hear fragments of their speech transported to us across time together with the record of what they made. This becomes a mantra, intensifying their work by verbally articulating their action's adherence to Divine instruction even as they physically executed the work in accordance with God's instruction.

A beautiful midrash in Vayikra Rabbah (1:7) on the first verse of Vayikra, just on the other side of our parshiyot, brings this idea, literally, into deeper relief. Dr. Moshe Simon-Shoshan offers a beautiful analysis of this midrash (whose full import is only understood by reading it in its entirety, but I excerpt the parts relevant to our point here) in an online shiur here: <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/midrash69/09midrash.htm>, and I bring

his translation:

THE LORD CALLED UNTO MOSHEH (Vayikra 1:1)

What is written prior to this? The section of the Tabernacle: "Even as the Lord commanded Mosheh."

This may be compared to [the case of] a king, who commanded his servant, saying to him, 'Build me a palace.' On everything he built he wrote the name of the king; he built the walls, and wrote on them the name of the king; he built pillars, and wrote on them the name of the king; he roofed it with beams, and wrote on them the name of the king.

...

So, too, when the Blessed Holy One said to Mosheh: 'Make me a Tabernacle,' he [i.e. Mosheh] wrote on everything he made 'Even as the Lord commanded Mosheh'.

This midrash further develops our idea. In the conception of the midrash, the repetition of this notion means not that the builders articulated that their work was being done as God commanded Mosheh, but the objects themselves bore that stamp.

What motivates these two similar, but distinct, interpretations, and what sense can we make of them?

From the perspective of interpretation, it seems clear that the meta-repetition motivates interpretations that suggest that the "as God commanded Mosheh" was represented by some additional *layer* of the experience. From this added

layer of text, the interpreters create a layer of speech, in the case of the Or ha-Hayyim, and a layer of physical, engraved text, in the case of Vayikra Rabbah.

Perhaps for us as readers, we can extract a message: performing acts in accordance with God's command can be done with layers of intensification. The act itself serves as a testament to fulfilling a command. But if we choose, we can deepen our experience of fulfilling that call through layers of speech. Verbal declarations, testifying to the significance of performing an act, embed its fulfillment deeper into our selves. Alternatively, or additionally, somehow physically altering the object with that inscription or symbol that it is witness to our observing God's mandate further intensifies that connection and commitment to the command, and to God.

The repetition of these parshiyot, through the lens of these commentaries, helps us see that repetition can be seen dimensionally as intensification. As we encounter Divine Instruction in its various forms in our world and in our daily lives, may we find the ways to speak aloud our connections to it, and to etch into it our connection to its necessity, and to God, in our world.

Shabbat shalom!

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