



D'var Torah for Parshayiot Vayakel/Pekudei **By Terri Eisenberg, March 18, 2023**

Shabbat Shalom.

It was last spring when the Leadership Team asked me if I would chair the committee to guide the making of a new parochet for our aron and I was honored to have the opportunity to contribute to our community in this way.

Each year as we read the several parshiot about building the mishkan I can't help but put on my designer's hat. In my professional life as a graphic designer, I worked with architects and engineers to design a wide variety of products. The projects that I worked on usually had many moving pieces and parts with myriad details to consider.

Building the Mishkan is a huge complex project.

In Terumah we are given the project overview, donations are solicited, and the first set of plans are described in great detail.

In Ki Tissa the lead designer is selected. G-d singles out Betzalel whom he endowed with divine spirit of skill, ability and knowledge in every kind of craft.

In Vayakhel, there is community outreach and engagement, and generous contributions are freely given by both men and women. (By the way, it was a very successful capital campaign.) All other skilled artisans were invited to work under the direction and leadership of Betzalel and Oholiav and there are detailed descriptions of the Tabernacle, Aron, and all the accompanying ritual objects being built. (I think it is interesting to note that the women were the weavers).

Finally, in Pekudei, the Mishkan is complete which is an amazing accomplishment and there is a recounting of the materials used and how it was built.

For most, the long and very specific details and requirements for building the Mishkan and then the repetition of those details do not exactly make for exciting reading. Why are they given so much attention?

If you have ever been involved in a construction project in your home or work you know the importance of details. Some may seem insignificant, but they make all the difference to a successful project. At the time of the Exodus there were not any CAD files or 3D visualizations provided. But there were words...words providing clear directions that would lead to the desired outcome.

In Terumah, G-d tells Moshe to “let them (the Israelites) Make Me a Sanctuary”. A work project for me might have started with a client saying:

“I need a brochure (or “design me a brochure”). Here is my draft text with images. Work your magic and pretty it up.” Really? Pretty it up? I thought my job was about clearly communicating complex information in a visual way. The end result would be a positive user experience as well as aesthetically pleasing.

Today as we read Parashat Vayakhel Pekudei I wondered what did Betzalel, master craftsman, artist, and teacher chosen by G-d, think about as he set about the task of leading a community to execute the detailed instructions (G-d’s vision) relayed to him by Moshe, to make his designs of gold, silver, and copper? Where is the space for creativity and inspiration?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks Z”l writes:

“The key to Betzalel lies in his name. It means “In the shadow of G-d.” Betzalel’s gift lay in his ability to communicate, through his work, that art is the shadow cast by God. Religious art is never “art for art’s sake.” ... The Tabernacle itself was a kind of microcosm of the universe, with one overriding particularity; that in it you felt the presence of something beyond – what the Torah calls “the glory of G-d” which “filled the Tabernacle” (Exodus 40:35).”

In Judaism we have a concept for this - Hiddur Mitzvah - the beautification of a mitzvah or commandment. This gave me a whole new perspective for "Pretty it up."

Terumah means gift or offering. Terumah began with G-d talking to Moshe: "Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him." Building the Mishkan should be an act of love and inspiration.

Terumah also is from the root (resh, vav, mem) or roam, meaning "to be exalted" or "to be uplifted, set apart for a higher purpose".

Milton Glaser, z"l, the renowned graphic designer, widely known for the I heart NY icon and the Dylan Poster (the black silhouette with colorful curls) likes to describe art as "work that goes beyond its functional intent and moves us in deep and mysterious ways...".

Beauty sets things apart and beautiful objects appeal to the senses. Visually enhancing our ritual objects and practices, elevates them, giving us pleasure, drawing us in, providing joy and meaning, enhancing our spirituality, and fulfilling commandments in an aesthetically pleasing way.

And what about all those detailed design constraints. While at times the details can feel overwhelming and like we do not have a creative outlet, having no design constraints can be very challenging. There needs to be an underlying structure that gives meaning to the work. Working within that structure we think critically about a project and use our intuition and aesthetic sense to guide decisions that elevate the work to something even greater than we expected.

Toward the beginning of Pekudei we read "Now Betzalel, son of Uri, son of Hur, of the Tribe of Judah, had made all that G-d had commanded Moshe." The job is done.

So it is fitting that today we celebrate Minyan Ma'or's new parochet and refurbished aron – on Shabbat Vayakhel Pekudei, when the building of the Mishkan, a portable sanctuary, a dwelling for G-d, and a holy space that signifies to the Israelites that G-d is always among them, is completed.

Our aron, originally designed and built by David Strauss for the Newton Center Minyan, like the Mishkan, needed to be portable. We needed to move it each week to store it when not in use. We needed to move it whenever we relocated for a simcha. It relocated with the Newton Center Minyan to Hebrew College from the First Baptist Church. When we became Minyan Ma'or, it came with us to our new home at Temple Emanuel. After all that wandering it was in need of some TLC. Our own master craftsman, Steve Greenberg, offered to refurbish the aron and you see his skillful and heartfelt work today.

The main constraint for the parochet was size. The committee had engaging and thoughtful conversations regarding the imagery, colors, textures, and fabrics of the parochet as well as the experience of opening and closing the aron. We wanted the parochet to be aesthetically pleasing, to have a visual connection to ma'or, to feel fresh and contemporary, to integrate with the color of the wood of the aron, and to be easy to use.

We viewed the many layers of the hand dyed silk, organza, and linen akin to the many layers of understanding and interpretation of Torah. The colors and shapes are organic and drawn from ideas of nature and light. The beauty of Ilana's work enhances and elevates our experience of caring for, taking out, and reading the Torah each week.

I want to thank Bert Fern, Elizabeth Rosenzweig, and Steve Greenberg for giving their time, boundless energy, expertise, and hearts to this project. And of course, a huge thank you to Ilana Saraf, fiber artist extraordinaire. Those of us on the committee that watched the parochet evolve are inspired and awed by Ilana's visual interpretations. A connection to and love of Torah as well as the joy of working with her hands comes through in every stitch. You have each given a wonderful gift to Minyan Ma'or, one that we hope enhances the kahal's Shabbat experience each week. Shabbat shalom.