

Creating Space on the Inside – Parashat Pekudei 5781

Rabbi Michael Safra

“In the first month of the second year, on the first of the month, the Tabernacle was set up.”

We didn't read those words from the Torah last year. This Shabbat, Vayakhel-Pekudei-Hachodesh, was the first Shabbat when our sanctuary was closed. The *b'nai mitzvah* for Noah Friedman and Danielle Krinn, which were supposed to be celebrated that morning, were postponed. We didn't know what Passover was going to look like; we had no idea how long this emergency would last; and we still imagined some date in the not-too-distant future when we'd be able to flip a switch, declare the pandemic over, and invite everyone for a huge, return-to-normalcy *kiddush* in Gudelsky Hall.

A year later, we still don't know how this will end. But the data are encouraging; and even with all the disruption, we can look back with amazement at how much we've learned, accomplished, and even grown.

We see the trajectory of our strange year in the Torah readings for this morning. The Maftir describes the final preparations for the exodus: *“Hachodesh ha-zeh lakhem rosh hodashim, This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you,”* and you will take a lamb to slaughter, sprinkle its blood on the doorposts, and eat its meat as a Passover offering. Parshat Pekudei describes how exactly one year later, on the first day of the first month of the second year of their journey, the Tabernacle was set up. As noted in *Etz Hayim*, the book of Exodus, which began in the darkness of Egyptian slavery “concludes in the brilliant illumination of God's glory before the eyes of the entire House of Israel.” Most of the book – from the 10th plague to crossing the sea, finding food and water in the wilderness, defeating Amalek, receiving the law, designing and constructing the Mishkan – it all happened in one eventful year.

But there is a curiosity in the narrative as the second year begins. Moses completes all the work, exactly as commanded, but he is not able to enter the sanctuary: *“V'lo yakhol Moshe lavo el ohel mo-ed, Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.”* The commentaries say that even Moses needed permission to enter God's earthly abode. But it seems strange. Moses enters holy space all the time; he speaks to God face-to-face; why is he denied entry precisely at this sacred moment of dedication?

Nahum Sarna comments in *Etz Hayim*, “It is unclear whether entry is literally hindered, or is impermissible, or that he simply dared not enter.” Now, that's an interesting insight. Maybe Moses could have entered, but he was scared or intimidated. He saw the smoke and just felt like he didn't belong.

I wonder if anyone's ever felt that way while standing at the entrance to our sanctuary. Everybody, every visitor is always invited here. But are there ever instances when a person looks in and feels she doesn't belong? Maybe it's a Jew of color who looks in and doesn't see others who look like her. Maybe it's a Jewish beginner who hears mumbling and singing in Hebrew and thinks, “These people

are so advanced; I don't belong here." Maybe it's a person with a disability, or maybe someone who happened to approach the doors at exactly the moment when two friends were sharing an inappropriate joke a little too loudly. Nobody put up a barrier; nobody did anything objectively wrong; but we can imagine what is going through the mind of that person at the door. "*V'lo yakhol Moshe lavo*, Moses could not enter." There was no space for him in the Tent of Meeting at that moment.

I want to share a painful story. It happened almost 19 years ago at B'nai Israel, on the weekend between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when we had a tradition to bless all the babies who had been born to our congregation over the previous year. It was a joyous celebration. The babies were cute. The parents were smiling. But it was painful for me. Sharon and I had been trying unsuccessfully to have children for several years at that point, so you can forgive me for thinking: I should be up there with our baby too. I stepped off the *bima* and went to my office; and sure enough, there was Sharon, together with another couple and a rapidly emptying box of tissues. At that moment, they felt they could not enter the sanctuary.

B'nai Israel is among more than 100 synagogues around the world participating in Infertility Awareness Shabbat, sponsored by Yesh Tikvah and several organizations, including one we work with more closely, The Jewish Fertility Foundation. The chosen theme for this year is Creating Space, which means taking stock of our communal experiences and family gatherings to ensure that all present will feel welcome and seen. It means that we actively work to be mindful of our language and ensure that it is supportive and kind. We find unique and sensitive ways to include those struggling to grow their families in our celebrations.

Approximately 1 in 8 couples in America are diagnosed with infertility every year. IVF is an amazing technology, but it doesn't always work. The procedure leads to live birth under 50% of the time, and the percentages drop as women get older. It is expensive and often not covered by health insurance. I've been there. We used to joke that on most mornings, there were enough Jews in the waiting room at the fertility clinic to make a *minyan*. That may be because having children is such an important value in our community. Think about our synagogue – we run schools, we have youth groups, we create family celebrations for holidays. These things are wonderful. But sometimes, we have to pause and think how these programs might feel for couples who are struggling to have children? How can we better support them as they navigate a difficult path? How can we create space for them in our community as well?

That's what God did for Moses when he was afraid to enter the sanctuary. The book of Exodus ends with him standing on the outside, "Moses was unable to enter." But the very first word of the next book is "*Vayikra*, Then God called to Moses." Perhaps sensing Moses's apprehension, God reached out and called Moses in. "Speak to the Israelite people and say to them. ..." I wonder if we can do the same. Call out, reach out to those standing just outside.

But there is hope, *yesh tikvah*. I am reminded of a story of a famous rabbi who began his career on the outside. It is said that when the great sage Hillel was a young man, he earned only half a *zuz* pay each day. He spent half his pay on food and shelter and paid the other half to the doorkeeper at the Bet Midrash so he could hear the teachings of the rabbis.

On one winter day, he did not have enough money to enter. He went up to the roof and eavesdropped through the skylight. Snow fell all day, and by evening he was completely covered. But Hillel hardly noticed; his mind was absorbed by the words of Torah being spoken down below.

When night fell, however, Hillel could not move. His limbs were completely frozen. He lay in the same place all night. When Shemayah and Avtalyon came into the study hall the next morning to teach, they noticed it was unusually dark. They looked up at the skylight and saw that it was blocked. They were ashamed to see Hillel up there, lying lifeless in the snow. Shemaya and Avtalyon went up to the roof with dry clothes. They warmed Hillel by the fire. And they decided that from that day forward, nobody should feel denied the opportunity to enter. The doorkeeper was dismissed from his duty, and it was declared that all who yearn for God and Torah must be invited inside.

V'lo yakhol moshe lavo el ohel moed. On this Shabbat, as we read about Moses's inability to enter the holy space. ... As we contemplate the remarkable journey, one year later, from slavery to freedom to dedication, and imagine that time in the not-too-distant future when our doors will open once again. ... As we express gratitude for our sacred space, our holy community, our joyous celebrations, let us think also about the ones who may be wary of entering. Let us call to them with compassion, as God called to Moses, inviting all who desire to learn and to teach, to worship and perform acts of kindness. Shabbat shalom.