

Parashat Pekudei 5774 – The Unfinished Work

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I had a strange, somewhat petty experience in college. It was the first day of class and the professor was going over the syllabus, and he challenged us. He said, “There are no mistakes on this syllabus. I went over it with my wife and we know there are no spelling mistakes. And if any one of you can find a mistake on this syllabus, I will add 2 points to your final grade.”

I found a mistake.

And so I went up to the professor after class and pointed it out, and he was shocked ... and not so amused, to the point that I felt badly for saying anything. And I never got the two points.

Many of you know that I am hardly the one to point out other people’s typographical errors! But I did learn an important lesson: Never say that something is perfect. Never think that you got it just right. People who publish books, which they work on for a ridiculous amount of time, know that there will always be mistakes to be corrected in the second edition.

This morning in Parashat Pekudei, we read of the completion of the Tabernacle: “**ויכל משה את** המלאכה, Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.” There is a parallel to the end of Creation in Genesis, where it says, **ויכל** עשה, (virtually the same words), On the seventh day God had finished the work that He had been doing and He ceased on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.”

The construction of the Tabernacle is written as a Creation story – or a ReCreation story. The Rabbis of the Mishnah proclaimed, “On the day that Moses completed erecting the Tabernacle, the world was erected along with it. ... Before the Tabernacle was erected, the world wobbled; from the instant that the Tabernacle was erected, the world was made firm.”¹

That’s an astounding statement. God’s world was not perfect. Creation wasn’t complete until the human beings had done their part. And even then, we have this repeating cycle of creation and destruction and rebirth:

- God creates a world that seems perfect – God said, “Let there be light”, and there was light. God is in control. But soon God is frustrated with humans and He re-opens the windows of heaven to let the flood waters return the world to chaos. Noah is asked to start again.
- What does God do to the beautiful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah that were filled with lawlessness and strife? God destroys them and Lot and his daughters start over.

¹ PRK 1:4.

- And what does God do to the powerful Egyptian empire that enslaved His people for 400 years? [He destroys them]; and how? The water separates – just as the waters above separated from the waters below to make room for the dry land of Creation. That’s another Creation story, a rebirth.
- And then we have this story of the erection of the Tabernacle.

And the cycle precedes the Torah. In the Midrash: Rabbi Abahu taught that the Holy One created many worlds, which He destroyed until He finally created this one of which the Torah writes, “God saw all that He had done and it was very good, וְהָיָה טוֹב מְאֹד.” “It was very good”, but it was not perfect. It could not be perfect and so the process of creating and perfecting continued.

And it continued after the Bible, because what happened to that Tabernacle? It trekked through the desert and was replaced by Solomon’s magnificent Temple – and the book of Kings uses that same Creation language. But that building wasn’t perfect either, or perhaps our ancestors weren’t perfect, and that Temple that symbolized the world was destroyed. And it was rebuilt and destroyed by the Romans. And the Rabbis, under the leadership of Yohanan ben Zakkai, created a “new world” of Torah, and the interpretation of Torah unified them and sustained them as worlds were built and destroyed by Moslems and Christians and Nazis. In the modern world, the Zionists built a new world in our homeland, which is a miracle but also is not perfect.

We have this theme that our world is constantly being created and destroyed and recreated, and there’s a unifying lesson: Don’t be surprised when you encounter imperfection and evil because even God cannot create perfection. And the corollary is just as true: If you think you see perfection, you’re not looking hard enough because that just isn’t possible.

One of my textbooks for a college survey on American history was Alan Brinkley’s best-selling book, “The Unfinished Nation.” The very title rejects the view of American Exceptionalism that says that our Founding Fathers created not just a “more perfect union”, but a society that was perfect and divine in every way, and that our Constitution is immutable and unerring.

My own view is a little more nuanced. We must be grateful for the freedoms and opportunities of America – and those blessings are especially profound for us as Jews. But the country that became independent in 1776 was not perfect. It took almost 90 years and a destructive Civil War to rid our nation of slavery, and then another 100 years to grant civil rights and voting rights to African Americans. It took 150 years for women to earn the right to vote. The project was unfinished.

You don’t have to be a partisan to notice the disturbing and widening gap between rich and poor, our dysfunctional prison system, broken immigration structure, the ongoing struggle to earn the right to love and to marry in a society that understands homosexuality differently than our ancestors did.

Reasonable people can disagree about the policy response, but we cannot ignore the imperfections. The great society that is America is unfinished ... which shouldn't surprise us. God's world is unfinished too; and we as human beings, as citizens, as individuals created in the image of God with remarkable skills, have a responsibility to continue working towards that "more perfect union."

On Thursday I received a copy of a letter that leaders of the Conservative and Reform movements sent to Prime Minister Netanyahu in Israel. According to media reports, the government is in the final stages of ceding control of the entire plaza at the Kotel, the Western Wall, to an Orthodox settler group, the El-Ad Foundation. We have been working for years with a commission organized by Natan Sharansky to build a special section in front of the wall where men and women can pray together, out loud, with a siddur and a Torah scroll. You can imagine the potential challenges if that special area is administered by Orthodox parties who do not recognize us.

There are people who see the fight for religious equality and pluralism in Israel as a distraction from the primary concerns about peace and security. They wonder why we can't preserve the status quo forever: It was good enough for my grandmother to pray separately from the men, so why shouldn't it be good enough for my daughter? But the idea that the status quo is perfect because it is old is ludicrous.

The status quo was established on the faulty premise that eventually orthodoxy would disappear altogether. The status quo pretends that we non-Orthodox Jews in America who care deeply for Israel and support her at every opportunity, practice inauthentic Judaism. Part of our job as Zionists and lovers of Israel is to recognize that the state that was created in 1948 was miraculous but not perfect. We are still creating the state as it should be.

In America as well, the past few months have been somewhat depressing, as we've been hit with those statistics that say the next generation cares less about the synagogue, less about Israel, less about observing *mitzvot*. Everyone is worried about how we can get them to change, to reverse the numbers that look like what the Rabbis called *yeridat hadorot*, the gradual decline of the generations. How can we get children to think more like their parents and grandparents?

I am also concerned about the numbers; there are pieces of our Jewish world that are broken or breaking and something has to be done. But my message is that this crisis is not so new. Worlds are constantly being destroyed and our mission is not just to use band-aids to try to preserve what has worked in the past. We have to reach Jews where they are and we have to engage them in the work of building new worlds, new programs, new relationships that speak to them and their concerns.

On Shabbat Pekudei, we have to recognize that “*Vay’khal*” is all a lie. Moses didn’t complete the Tabernacle. God didn’t complete Creation. The founding fathers didn’t finish our nation, and there is still work to do before we fully realize the miracle of Israel. But we can do it.

We can do it as long as we are willing, because we are endowed by God with the power to create. I conclude with the words of the British poet Christina Rossetti who asked, “Can anything be sadder than work left unfinished? Yes, work never begun.” With great joy, may we accept our responsibility to continue the work. Shabbat shalom.