

**Completing Creation**  
***Parashat Vayakhel-Pekudei***  
***Shabbat Parah***  
**March 10, 2018**  
**Rabbi Carl M. Perkins**  
**Temple Aliyah, Needham**

This morning, we read from the last, combined portion of the Book of Exodus, describing the completion of the construction of the Tabernacle. This is a challenging text to appreciate, since it's describing, for the third time in the Book, a structure that none of us has ever seen. We may have been to a synagogue, a church or a mosque, but we've never been to the Tabernacle. Now, it's true: there are scale models in various places -- in Pennsylvania Dutch country and at Timna Park in the south of Israel -- but that's not quite the same.

Clearly, it was considered important in the Biblical period. The description of the design and building of the Tabernacle takes up the last third of the Book of Exodus. Although we may be more drawn to the first third of Exodus, with its description of the conflict between Moses and Pharaoh and the rescue of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage; or the second third, describing the laws that the Jewish people were given to live by; still, it's hard to deny that the Tabernacle is important, when it takes up so much of the Book.

The rhetorical style confirms its importance. As was noted as early as the rabbinic period, the creation of the Tabernacle in the wilderness was considered a mirror of the construction of the entire world. Look at the study sheet and you can see the parallels. These parallels become even more precise when we get to the completion of the construction. Look at items 4 through 7: "God finished" the work; "Moses finished" the work. "God saw all that He'd made," "Moses saw all the work." "And it was very good" versus "they had made it precisely as God had commanded." And finally, "And God blessed the 7th days, and made it holy," and "Moses blessed the people," and "sanctified the Tabernacle."



So the creation of the Tabernacle is important. It's just like the creation of the world. That raises a basic question: Why? Why is it so important? Why bother with building a Tabernacle at all? After all, I would think that if any of us escaped from bondage, that wouldn't be the first thing we'd think of building. It seems so *impractical*, maybe even *superfluous*. It isn't until the Book of Numbers that we learn about the intricate way that the Israelites set up their camp to protect themselves, with three tribes on each side. You'd think that that would take precedence over the construction of the Ark and the Menorah and the Basin and the Tent, etc. Why doesn't it? Why? Why is the Tabernacle, and what it represents, so important?

Mircea Eliade was a brilliant Romanian scholar of religion. He argued that the key distinction within religious thinking is between the *sacred* and the *profane*, and that the religious challenge is to replicate that distinction in everything we do.

We can see that in the Biblical story of creation: God spends six days creating the world, and God sanctifies the seventh day to make it holy. As we move through time, we do the same: every seven days we have the opportunity to enter the holy time of Shabbat that evokes that initial distinction between the ordinary six days of creation and the holy seventh day.

And in the construction of the sanctuary, the Israelites are doing the same thing. They're taking ordinary building materials -- which they could use for anything else- and dedicating them to the holy. They're taking space -- which could be used for ordinary purposes -- and demarcating part of it for the holy and, in the next Book, they'll take certain people, the priests and the Levites, and separate them from the rest of us, to play their special role in helping the people access the holy.

And why? Because, to quote Eliade, "a person" -- a religious person, a person with a religious consciousness -- "can't live except in an atmosphere impregnated with the sacred." We need it. If we have a religious sensibility, we don't see, we don't *want* to see, the world as *homogenous*. There are ordinary places; and there are holy places. As in the world as a whole, *so too in the world we inhabit*.

We see this in later Jewish practice. When Jews would move to a new area, one of the first buildings they would construct would be a mikvah, a pool allowing for ritual immersion. Not because they needed a place to clean themselves, but because they wanted, they needed, a place to help them separate the sacred from the profane.

That maintaining and promoting this distinction is the essential role of the construction of the Tabernacle is made clear by the clear statement, repeated several times, that as important as the Tabernacle was, the Sabbath was more important. It was not permitted to work on the Tabernacle on the Sabbath because its very purpose was to further the separation of sacred and profane that Shabbat stands for.

In turn, this explains the amazing role played by Shabbat in the story of the creation of the world. You'd think that after that masterful creation of matter and life, that God would simply say: "Go forth and till the soil, and build homes, and communities." But instead, God sanctifies the seventh day by resting, thereby making clear that the acquisition of things is not the purpose of life. It's to contemplate and aspire to the holy.

You can't do that unless you maintain a separation between the holy and the profane, so that's what we do, every seven days.

Think about us, here in this room, gathered for worship on the Sabbath. There are many other, much more *practical* things we could be doing. But we're instead stepping back from those pursuits, and instead are simply *appreciating the here and now*. In a sense, we're mirroring God's behavior on the seventh day: we're consciously sanctifying this day, so as to give meaning *not only to today but to all the other days of the week*. To quote again Eliade, we are "express[ing] [our] desire to live in a pure and holy cosmos, as it was in the beginning, when it came fresh from the Creator's hands."

But I don't want to take that too far. I'm well aware that we are today celebrating a bat mitzvah. We might think that, just as the Book of Exodus concludes with *completion* of the construction of the Tabernacle, so too a bat mitzvah marks the

*completion* of a human being, and just as, at the end of Exodus, there's a celebration of the *completion* of the Tabernacle, so too on a bat mitzvah we celebrate the *completion* of the period of development we call childhood, and send our youngsters off on their own. Not quite.

Becoming a bar or bat mitzvah marks an important stage in the assumption of responsibility for one's behavior. You might say that if it marks anything, it's the *beginning*, rather than the end. It's the beginning of the opportunity to figure it all out, to learn what our responsibilities are in life, and to learn what it feels like to assume responsibility.

Since I'm talking about the phenomenon of *becoming* a bat mitzvah, it seems like the right time to invite Ayla up to join me, so I can speak directly to her, rather than about her.

Ayla, **Yasher Koach!** You know, it gives all of us who know who, who've watched you grow up, a lot of *nachat ruach*, well-deserved pride and joy, to be here on this day.

You're bright, you're inquisitive; you've got a great sense of humor, and you've spent a lot of time here in our shul, and in particular in this sanctuary. You know, it occurred to me that maybe I should ask you to give the charge to the bat mitzvah girl today, since I do recall a few years ago, you dressing up as me on Purim.

I want to remind you of something pretty obvious, but which we don't often think about. Much about preparing for, or taking part in this day is literally, impractical. Learning how to chant a haftarah won't necessarily help you get a job, or advance your career. Taking the time to be here today; it's not of *practical* value. That's not what this is all about. That's not what life is all about.

What this is about is, rather, of the *highest importance* and the source of the greatest joy.

It's focusing on the meaning of life; why we are here, and what we are on this earth to accomplish. And yes, studying our sacred texts, and exploring and

challenging them is precisely the way that we figure out how to live our lives. **It's all about the sacred and the profane**, remembering that there is a difference between them, and remembering which is which.

Your parents have invested a lot of time, energy, concern, and love in you and Eli, not so that you'll turn out precisely this way or that way. There was, after all, no blueprint for raising you. There never is a blueprint for raising children. Rather, their goal was to raise an inquisitive, thoughtful, and caring human being who will continue to learn and grow long after you become an adult.

My hope and prayer for you is that you'll continue to be in a state of becoming; that you'll continue to explore the essence of Judaism; you'll continue to learn Hebrew and to explore the many meanings of our tradition, and you'll continue to seek to discern the distinction between the sacred and the profane.

I have no doubt that as much as you have before you to learn, there is much that we will learn from you, in the days, weeks, and months and years ahead.

**Mazal Tov!**