Can We Learn from Moses' Accounting?

Pekudei

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I like to reflect in my sermons upon current events and things happening in the world in the light of the Torah and its insights. I do this for a number of reasons. Primarily, I want to show the connection between Torah and our lives today. It is important to see the relevance of our ancient religion and its teachings to modern situations and to realize how much we can learn when we place the modern and the ancient in conversation. It is interesting and instructive to view what is happening in our world in light of the approach of our tradition, and vice versa. In so doing, I am following the age old tradition of our darshanim, our classical preachers and rabbis, who have been doing the exact same thing, of making a connection to the lives of the listeners and the classical texts ever since the time of the first interpreters of Torah. The word midrash means to explore, investigate, seek, explain and entails all of this.

But not today. Today I am not going to refer to the headlines or what is happening in the news or in our lives. No references to financial markets, bailouts or the problems at AIG. Only text, only torah.

Parashat Pekudei is an inventory of all that went into the building of the Mishkan. That's right, this week's reading presents no narrative, no lofty call to embrace noble ideals, no inspiring story line, no intriguing subtle text to discern or struggle to comprehend. Just a listing of the building materials collected by Moses from the people and then used to construct the Tabernacle, the portable place of worship used in the Wilderness. Clearly it is an esoteric irrelevant reading.

But the rabbis are intrigued and ask: Why should Moses have to give an accounting of the use of all of the construction materials?

And so we might ask: Is this an instance of an archaic irrelevant biblical text? Is the rendering a superfluous account of something trivial that can be ignored and has no relevance to us?

Our sages teach this extensive repetition and comprehensive accounting of something already dealt with in a previous text must be here for a purpose. They posit that it is presented to serve as a warning to those who seek public office as well as to those who collect or manage money of the community.

We call that accountability, responsibility, and transparency. Whoops. I couldn't resist the temptation, a few terms from current day parlance snuck in.

Back to the mundane text about accounting - in which Moses publicly counts, weighs, and numbers the silver and gold contributed by the people. He does all of this meticulous work, our sages say, not just to preserve his own sterling reputation but to set an example

of integrity for future leaders as to how to avoid suspicion and even the appearance of wrongdoing.
One of my favorite midrashim goes as follows:

"When Moshe came to the Sanctuary the people looked after him and watched him until he went into the Tent. And this is what happened. One would then say to another, "See how fat is his neck. Look at how fat his thighs have become."

What is going on here? Moses has fat thighs?! Moses has put on weight? Who cares?

I have to use a contemporary reference to be sure we understand the context. It is almost as if the description is from one of those inane tv shows so many of us love to watch, like "Entertainment Tonight." It is as if he has been ambushed by those pesky, annoying TMZ kids. They are standing around gossiping about the way Moses looks as he is on his way into his tent or the Tent of Meeting. When they say that he has put on weight, the implication is that he is getting fat off the largesse of the people, that he is misusing or misappropriating the funds contributed by the public for himself.

The midrash continues:

"The son of Amram eats and drinks at our expense. Someone else said to another, '(What would you expect?) A person who controls the work of the Mishkan appoints his nephew as the paymaster and his great nephew Betzalel as the contractor. Is it a surprise that he should become wealthy?!'"

Moses happened to overhear what was being said about him, and so immediately he rendered an exact accounting of all that was collected and used.

In other words, this was what precipitated our Torah portion. Moses was concerned and wanted to put an end to the idle gossip. He wanted to remove any possible pretext for suspicion on the part of the people and so he gave a full accounting of each and every item that was donated, its use and purpose. He did all of this even though he didn't have to. He should have been beyond reproach. Of him, and him alone, did God say, "Moshe, My servant, is different from all others. In all of My house is he (alone) trustworthy." You can't get a better character reference than that.

The rabbis suggest that this week's torah portion is the result of malicious slanderous comments on the part of the people, and Moses' response and desire to squelch any such talk. After all, Moses could have easily used his position for personal gain. He could have felt entitled to enjoy some personal benefits, some extra compensation, or bonus payment for his work. He could have rationalized that he deserved some perks of office after all he did for the people and how hard he had worked. Yet one midrash quotes him as saying to the people, "During the wanderings in the desert I never asked anyone to carry my goods for me in their hands or on their donkeys. I carried my own belongings, I loaded my own donkeys and I unloaded them."

Similarly, the prophet Samuel many years later was seen as having an equally impeccable reputation. He was cited in the Talmud for refusing to benefit from his position or to exploit his office. He said, "When I went to ask forgiveness for Israel or when I was sent to anoint a king for them, I took my own sacrificial animals. When I had to perform my judicial functions I did not follow the common practice and force Israel to come to me, but rather at my own expense I wandered from place to place to grant judgment."

Samuel and Moses show us proper public service and serve as exemplary models for all time.

Our parasha describes a division of labor, and the commentators see it as a form of checks and balances. Abarbanel describes Moshe as the one who commanded the raising of funds and likens him to an executive. But wisely the one who determined its use does not act alone. He notes that the priest Ithamar was the paymaster, and that others were the ones who actually did the work. Abarbanel comments that Moses implemented such a system and divided the functions to avoid the temptation to fraud and to reassure the public that the funds were being used wisely and appropriately, that there would be no mismanagement of public funds. Whoops, I almost let slip another contemporary reference – but clearly that is not my intention.

The way Moses acted ultimately became the basis for the behavior and ethical code of civil servants and trustees of public funds of the Jewish communities for centuries. Based on Moses' model, Jewish law mandated that public funds had to be collected by at least two trustees. Here is a passage from the halakhic code, Hilkhot Tzedek, the Laws of Tzedekah.

"The overseers of the charity funds must keep each other constantly in view…If the trustees have to change the charity funds for another currency, or one denomination for another, they must do so through another person to avoid suspicion that they benefit from the transaction…"

The Talmud tells us that in the time of the Temple, the beit mikdash, the women of the family that sold incense for use in the Temple rituals did not wear any perfume. They did not wear it so that no one would ever suspect them of taking from what was supposed to be used in the Temple for their own benefit. For the same reason, the priest who collected the public donations entered the deposit area of the Temple barefoot and wearing a garment that had no sleeves or pockets.

In fact, neither the king nor the high priest was allowed to sit on the court that declared if a year would be a leap year or not. Why not? Because when an extra month was added to the calendar the king would have to pay an additional month's salary to civil servants. And the High Priest who walks bare foot across a cold stone floor when he officiates on Yom Kippur and who makes numerous immersions during the holiday might have reasons to not want the holiday to occur a month later, when it is colder. Consequently neither was allowed to take part in the decision making process determining the new year, since the outcome had a direct personal impact on their lives.

Biblical scholar Meir Tamari who was the chief economist in the bank of Israel writes, "Halakhah provides the legal framework for the protection of public funds against waste and fraud, but also for the implementation of an equitable fiscal system. Such a framework is of itself, however, insufficient to effectively prevent corruption. In addition, this requires spiritual and cultural norms that not only reject corruption but also create a social atmosphere which minimizes even the very appearance of unethical behavior."

But as I said at the outset, today's reading and talk is just about ancient times. Too bad it doesn't hold any lessons for us today or for any of our public servants or those who administer public funds.

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