

Room for More

Parshat Pekudei / Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation
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While it was not in preparation for the Oscars, I have recently managed to watch a few movies, one of them being “Oppenheimer.” The film managed to do something impressive: it transformed what could have been a monotonous story of design and construction into a compelling drama, a tale of scientific discovery and the man at the center of it, that ultimately changed the world. (It’s pretty good by the way...I recommend it and I think it will do well during this awards season.)

Similarly, after what feels like years of detailed instructions, we read this morning the end of Sefer Shemot. It too ends with a dramatic culmination of sorts, not unlike a scene in Oppenheimer when the film’s protagonist Cillian Murphy, has an strangely intimate moment with the device he has worked so hard to bring into the world.

Though obviously different context, the Torah too describes a culminating moment of where the Mishkan is finally fully assembled and operational:

וַיָּקֶם מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הַמִּשְׁכָּן וַיִּתֵּן אֶת-אֲדָנָיו וַיִּשֶׂם אֶת-קַרְשָׁיו וַיִּתֵּן אֶת-בְּרִיחָיו וַיָּקֶם אֶת-עַמֻּדָיו...

In the first month of the second year, on the first of the month, the Tabernacle was set up. Moses set up the Tabernacle, placing its sockets, setting up its planks, inserting its bars, and erecting its posts. He spread the tent over the Tabernacle...

He took the luchot and placed them in the ark; he fixed the poles to the ark, placed the cover on top of the ark, and brought the ark inside the Tabernacle.

He placed the table in the Tent of Meeting, outside the curtain, on the north side of the Tabernacle...He put the lechem hapanim, the shewbread on it...He put the Menorah in the Tent of Meeting opposite the table... And he lit the Menorah...

He placed the altar of gold in the Tent of Meeting, before the curtain.

All the pieces are there finally, each serving a clear role in the larger structure.

Well, except one. One of these things was not like the other, at least according to the 13th century Spanish commentator Rabbeinu Bahya.

Rabbeinu Bahya writes that everything in the Mishkan had a distinct purpose. For example, “it has already been explained that the ark, the *aron* had an important role of holding the *luchot* in it, and the *kapporet* [the covering] was on top of it, and then there were the *keruvim*, which prove that there are such beings as angels.

אבל השלחן מה היה משמש ומה צורך היה במשכן ובמקדש לעשות בהם שלחן.

“But what need did the presence of the table actually fill, both in the Mishkan and eventually in the Beit HaMikdash?”

It's not clear what exactly was the role of the *shulchan* and why it needed to be a fixture in the Tabernacle at all. It isn't for offering sacrifices or burning incense or holding tables. It held bread - the shewbread - all the time. That's what it did.

To answer his question, Rabbeinu Bahya quotes a somewhat famous line in the Gemara in Brachot, 55a:

רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן וְרַבִּי אֱלֶעָזָר דְּאָמְרִי תְרוּנִיָּהוּ: כָּל זְמַן שֶׁבֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ קָיָים — מְזַבֵּחַ מְכַפֵּר עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְעַכְשָׁיו, שֶׁלְּחָנוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם מְכַפֵּר עָלָיו.

“Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Elazar both say: As long as the Temple stood, the altar atoned for Israel's transgressions. Now that it is destroyed, a person's table atones for his transgressions.”

Rabbeinu Bahya is making a surprising assertion. Yes, there was a table in the Mishkan which held the shewbread but that was not its true purpose. The shulchan in the Mishkan was meant to teach us about the power of our own tables. According to the Gemara, since the destruction of the Temple, we are to think of our tables as mini altars, making what happens at and around our tables highly significant. If the sacrificial order stood at the center of Judaism during Temple times, then Rabbeinu Bahya is arguing that our tables now are equally central to our religious lives.

Specifically, I want to highlight a number of implications, both halakhic and communal, of this idea that seeks to elevate our humble dining room tables into holy vessels.

This notion of the table as an altar is the source for the near-universal minhag of Jews putting salt on Challah, for salt accompanied grain offerings (Vayikra 2:13), burnt offerings (Ezekiel 43:24) and was even part of the incense offering, the ketoret (Shemot 30:35). So every time you put salt on your challah, consider why we do this (besides the fact that salt on bread is delicious). One of the commentaries on the Shulchan Aruch, the באר היטב, takes this idea even further and says it's forbidden to squish a bug on your table because your table has to remain hold like the altar!

Rabbeinu Bahya cites a stranger minhag yet, from medieval France:

ומנהג חסידים שבצרפת שעושים משלחנם ארון לקבורה

להורות כי האדם לא ישא מאומה בידו ולא ילונו בעמלו כי אם הצדקה שעשה בחייו והטובה שהוא מיטיב על שלחנו, ולכך אמרו רז"ל המאריך על שלחנו מאריך לו ימיו ושנותיו.

It became an accepted practice amongst the pious Jews of France to construct their caskets out of the wood of their tables in order to demonstrate the idea that their table become the means of their atonement...

It also was to signify that a person does not take with them any of the material things they enjoyed on earth. The only thing they can take with them is the evidence of the charitable deeds performed while alive. The table was a prime symbol of such charitable deeds. This is also why the sages (Berachot 54) said that one who spends a long time over his meal, with guests and allowing those in need to join, will have their life extended."

I don't want to suggest that after Shabbos we go and turn our dining room tables into coffins. However, I think Rabbeinu Bahya is driving home the point that what happens around a Shabbos table has real import.

I've been thinking about Rabbeinu Bayha's statement that "*The table is a prime symbol of charitable deeds.*" In his mind, a meal is to be shared and a table extended. It is a unique space where so much can happen: we can share food with someone who might need it; we can build connections with people we might not know or know well; we can sing; we can slow down, luxuriate and take a load off in a way that is meaningful and even potentially holy.

Making our tables spaces for charitable hospitality is a beautiful idea and also easier said than done at times. It can be complex to open our homes to strangers or people with whom we don't feel quite so comfortable. During Covid this kind of hospitality all but disintegrated and I think many communities - ours included - have still not fully recovered.

I will also be the first to tell you that hosting people for Shabbat is real work. From Tuesday or Wednesday on most weeks, Julie and I are preparing for Shabbat and it can easily take us the rest of the weekend to recover and restore order in our kitchen. And yet, the simple act of *hachnasat orchim*, the mitzvah of bringing in guests, is so vital to our community's growth and flourishing. Many of our longest standing members were brought in and made to feel welcome in this community by earlier generations of ASBI hosts, who brought them into their homes for Shabbat.

Our shul receives consistent requests for hosting: some who are considering moving to Lakeview for a few years or relocating their families and are wondering, what kind of community is this, really? That is the question we must consider: what kind of community are we, really? Are we the kind of shul where people are warm, but the relationships only go so deep? Or are we striving for more meaningful connections with those in this room and in this building, beyond our closest friends?

Gathering together over a Shabbat meal isn't just a recruitment strategy (although it is a highly effective one), it also helps to strengthen the quality of our connections, nudging us beyond the polite "good Shabbos" we might say in passing to more substantive and authentic relationships. It is these kinds of thicker bonds that we might lean upon during a tough stretch and that can be so fulfilling, when we are given the opportunity to help someone in our shul.

In the Shabbat bulletin, there is a blurb about hospitality and a link to sign up as a host. Here is what we are asking: if you are able to add a couple of guests every now and again at your table, please sign up to do so. We are hoping that each Shabbat we will have 1-2 ASBI member units "on deck" to potentially host a couple of people, either those visiting our community or others just looking for a Shabbat meal. (And if you would like to be involved in this larger hospitality effort, please let me know after Shabbat.)

Let me conclude on a personal note. Growing up, I watched my parents host many guests on Shabbat. Yes, it helps to have a chef as a father but many people who love food take a break when they're not working. Not my parents. As kids, for many years, we expected Shabbat guests and we were disappointed when we didn't have any, and I have been struck recently to hear a similar refrain from Yara and Amalya. Let us try to cultivate this same sense of expectation and excitement, that Shabbat is just not the same without guests joining us around the table.

As we close the book on Shemot and the Mishkan, let us remember its original purpose: to build a space where God's presence dwells among us. Shemot concludes with the description of this holy presence descending upon the Mishkan:

וַיִּכֶס הָעָנָן אֶת-אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּכְבֹּד ה' מְלֵא אֶת-הַמִּשְׁכָּן:

The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of God filled the Tabernacle. Let us take the words of the Gemara to heart. While we may no longer have a Tabernacle or a Temple, we can bring the Presence of God into each one of our homes, seated around our Shabbat tables.