



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Pekudei 5774

By Dani Passow

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The Israelites' first building project—the *Mishkan*—is about to be completed. We can recognize similarities between its construction and the building of our own communal structures: raising the funds, enlisting a contractor and choosing design elements. And yet, though modern communal leaders often ceremonially lay the cornerstone—complete with the entertaining and tellingly odd juxtaposition of dress clothes, shovel and hard hat—they rarely actively participate in the physical construction.

Not Moshe. We are told that the Israelite leader physically assembled the Mishkan himself: “God spoke to Moshe saying: ‘On the day of the first new moon, on the first of the month, you shall erect the Tabernacle.’”¹ Though the entire nation donated materials, and Betzalel and his entourage created the Mishkan’s vessels and parts, the final paragraphs of the book of Exodus make it clear that it was Moshe alone who put those pieces together: “*He* took and placed the Testimony into the Ark...*He* put the Table in the Tent of Meeting...*He* placed the Menorah in the Tent of the Meeting...*He* placed the Gold Altar in the Tent of the Meeting.”² And so on...

It is difficult to ignore the centrality of Moshe in this process. Moreover, it seems odd that he was engaged in physical labor altogether. Though Moshe certainly was a man of action, we’ve become accustomed to seeing him in the role of political leader and judicial scholar, not handyman. And he certainly didn’t have spare time on his hands; *Parashat Yitro* says that Moshe sat “from morning until night” adjudicating legal cases brought by the Israelites.³ Was there no one more skilled in construction than Moshe to put the finishing touches on the Mishkan, and wouldn’t Moshe’s time have been better spent in other ways?

In June of 2009, I and many of my fellow participants on AJWS’s Rabbinical Students’ Delegation to Senegal were asking similar questions. In our ten days in Senegal, we spent most of our time building latrines in two remote villages. If our aim was to promote social justice, shouldn’t we have used the skills in which we had been trained—writing and teaching—to help these people, rather than doing manual labor?

In order to answer this question, we need to ask ourselves about the purpose of service in general, whether it be religious worship or social justice. For whom do we act, ourselves or the other? The Torah asks us to love God with all of our “heart, soul, and might” and to love the neighbor and even the stranger as ourselves. We act not only to benefit others, but also to have an effect on *our* character. Perhaps we can discharge a specific duty to help the poor by writing a check of 10 percent of our income, but if love is the goal, we need to be overcome with care, with a drive to serve.

¹ Exodus 40:2.

² Exodus 40: 20-24.

³ Exodus 18:13.

Thus, in order for Moshe to serve God with his entire being, he needed to leave the desert study hall and create holiness with his hands. If his study led only to more study, and didn't cultivate a personality that strove to serve God with every faculty, the study itself would have been flawed. So too, if our internal passion for justice can be relegated to a specific form of action, a specific place or a specific time, then those very actions themselves miss the point as we fail to internalize the message that we must become consumed with a drive for justice, have our hearts torn open whenever we encounter suffering, and seek to address that suffering in every way we can. Just as Proverbs teaches us to "know God in all your ways,"⁴ so too with all of our being must we fight for justice.

And yet, our own passion for justice shouldn't be cultivated at the expense of those we are seeking to help. It's important that Moshe's foray into carpentry was a one-time act, and that he didn't eclipse the contributions of the artisans and carpenters and craftsmen whose expertise was necessary to build the Mishkan. Similarly, my week of service was designed as a full-bodied sharp awakening, a reminder that my every-day activities must be infused with this same passion for stopping injustice that I felt in Senegal with a shovel in my hands. But the long-term labor of building communities and the sense of accomplishment that comes with it—belongs in the hands of those most knowledgeable and experienced—the community members themselves.



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⁴ Proverbs 3:6.

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