

Parashat Vayakhel-Pekudei 5780

Shabbat Shalom!!

In these trying times when we cannot meet in person, Shoshana and I would like to at least connect with as many people as we can via technology. So one thing we would like to do is send out something on Fridays about the Torah portion for Shabbat.

This Shabbat's Torah portion is a double-portion: *Vayakhel* and *Pekudei*. (The Hebrew term for a Torah portion is *parasha* and the word *parashat* means "the portion of"). This double portion concludes the book of Exodus, which is called "*Sh'mot*" in Hebrew (*Sh'mot* means "the names of," coming from the first verse of the book of *Sh'mot* which says "these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob..."). These two portions mostly speak about the building of the Ark of the Pact and the *Mishkan* (the Tabernacle). There's also a section that speaks about the clothing of the High Priest (*Kohen Gadol*).

The name of the first *Parasha*, *Vayakhel*, means to gather together. It shares the same three letter Hebrew root (most Hebrew words are formed from a three consonant root) (*Kuf*, *Hey*, *Lamed* i.e. the "k," "h," and "l" sounds) as the word for "community" or "congregation" in Hebrew: *kehillah*. The need for *kehillah*, for community, is particularly acute these days. We need to support each other as our necessary social distancing can create feelings of isolation, solitude, and loneliness. The goal of a synagogue is to be a *kehillah kedushah*, a holy community – something much more profound than simply a social club, though clearly the social component of a *kehillah* is extremely important too. In fact the Hebrew for synagogue, *beit k'nesset*, literally means "a house of gathering/assembling" which is essentially what the Greek origin of the word "synagogue" also means. So in our portions this Shabbat, Moses gathers the people to instruct them about the construction of the Tabernacle and the Ark.

It's important to remember that this Shabbat's portions follow upon last week's *parasha* which contained the story of the Golden Calf – a shocking story of idol worship that comes so soon after the revelation at Mt. Sinai. In last week's *parasha*, *Ki Tisah*, the episode with the Golden Calf is preceded and succeeded by the commandment to observe Shabbat and to keep it holy. I believe that Shabbat was placed in those parts of last week's portion because it was seen as a kind of antidote to idolatry, as a day during which to nurture ourselves spiritually. I think the same is true of this Shabbat's portions. The focus on the Ark and the Tabernacle is also there to cultivate a spiritual dimension in our lives. The word for Tabernacle is *mishkan* which shares the

root that means “to dwell” (*shin, kaf, nun*). The Tabernacle was to function as a mobile Mt. Sinai, something that would keep us in mind of our connection to G!d and encourage us to seek that connection, and to make G!d’s presence felt in the midst of the community. The experience of a spiritual dimension in our lives is generally much more transformative than a philosophical proof or argument about G!d’s existence. When we have those experiences that transcend our daily lives and connect us to something beyond us, that moves most people much more than beliefs. So the challenge is: how do we keep alive that connection with something transcendent in our day to day lives? I would argue that our tradition of Torah study and mitzvot was our sages’ prescription.

I’d like to end with one more point. Whenever we finish the reading of a book of the Torah in a service the congregation says the phrase: *khazak, khazak, v’nitkhazek* (be strong, be strong, and we shall be strengthened) which is then repeated by the Torah reader. Those are very apt words for these days. Be strong, stay healthy and safe, and, hopefully, we will emerge from this crisis even stronger. Shabbat Shalom!!