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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

IS THE MISHKAN A SYMBOL OF RELIGIOUS EQUALITY? IF NOT, CAN IT BECOME ONE?

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Nechamah Leibowitz zt"l's 5722 worksheet on Parshat Terumah draws attention to a detail of the Torah's account of the Tabernacle's construction. The verb used to command the construction varies between **ועשית**, first person singular – used for the Shulchan, the Menorah, and the subcomponents of the Aron - and **ועשו**, third person plural – used for the Ark itself, and for the construction of the Mishkan in its entirety. She cites two interpretations of that variance.

The first is Midrash Tanchuma Vayakhel 8.

We find that when the Holy Blessed One said to Mosheh to make the Mishkan,

He said about each item **ועשית** (singular), but regarding the Ark he said **ועשו** (plural) – why?

It must be that the Holy Blessed One commanded the making of it to all Israel,

so that no one of them would have the capacity to open his mouth toward his fellow and say:

"I donated a great deal for the Ark, therefore I learn a great deal, and I have a greater share in it than you, whereas you donated almost nothing for the Ark, and therefore you have no share in Torah".

אנו מוצאין כשאמר הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה לעשות את המשכן,

א"ל על כל דבר ודבר "ועשית", ועל הארון אמר "ועשו" – למה?

אלא שצוה הקדוש ברוך הוא לעשותו לכל ישראל,

שלא יהא לאחד מהם פתחון פה על חברו לומר ש

אני נתתי הרבה בארון, לפיכך אני לומד הרבה, ואני יש לי בו יותר ממך,

ואתה לא נתת בארון כלום אלא מעט, לפיכך אין לך חלק בתורה,

This midrash would make an excellent text for Ark dedication plaques in shuls, batei midrash, and day schools.

I have three questions regarding it:

1) The hypothetical taunter conflates the Aron with the Torah. Why would one think that donating for a container means that one learns more of its contents? Is the large donor assuming better access to materials, or to teachers, or some sort of magical effect?

2) G-d commands the Aron to be made "for all Israel" equally regardless of how much each individual contributed to the overall Tabernacle Construction Fund. I think this means even if one person contributed a greater percentage of their available means, meaning even if person X genuinely made the construction of the Mishkan a higher priority than person Y, they still have an equal share in Torah.

Do you agree?

3) G-d does **not** command the Shulchan and the Menorah, or the subcomponents of the Aron to be made "for all Israel". It follows that larger donors **can** claim a greater share in those physical objects. It ought to follow as well that they can claim a greater share in what those physical objects symbolize. Does the Tanchuma intend this implication? If yes, what do you think the Shulchan and Menorah and subcomponents of the Ark symbolize?

Tanchuma continues with two representations of Torah. The first is water.

This is why the Torah is analogized to water, as Scripture says: *Attention: Everyone thirsty – go to water!*

Just as a person is not embarrassed to say to their fellow: "Pour me water",

so too a person **should not** be embarrassed to say to a lesser person "Teach me Torah", "Teach me this"; and just as water, whoever wants to drink it – can drink without charge,

so too, anyone who wishes to learn Torah – learns without charge and without paying money, as Scripture says: *Go, provision yourselves without money and without charge.*

ולכך נמשלה התורה למים, שנאמר (ישעיה נה) **הוי כל צמא לכו למים –**

כשם שאין אדם מתבייש לומר לחברו "השקני מים",

כך לא יתבייש לומר לקטן ממנו "למדני תורה", "למדני דבר זה",

וכשם שהמים כל הרוצה לשתות ישתה בלא מחיר,

כך כל הרוצה ללמוד תורה לומד בלא מחיר ובלא כסף,

שנא': לכו שברו בלא כסף ובלא מחיר,

Nowadays, this representation is not descriptively accurate – we live in a boutique bottled-water economy, and I'm charged per gallon for the municipal water piped to my house. But in the narrative arc of Chumash, Rivkah pumps water for Eliezer's caravan, and her *chessed* is generally located in the action rather than in the object; and Bnei Yisroel's offer to pay Edom for their drinking water in 20:19 is presented as an extreme gesture. So I think it's important to treat the analogy in its literary context.

Or maybe not. Maybe the point of Yeshayah 55:1 is to prescriptively critique systems that charge for either water or Torah.

Or alternatively, the point is that charging for Torah can be

legitimate in economic or societal conditions radically different than those of Yeshayah.

Tanchuma's second representation is on a different axis:

And why was the Torah given in the wilderness?

To say that just as the wilderness is ownerless = given over to all human beings,

so too the words of Torah are ownerless to those who wish to learn.

Tanchuma applies this metaphor specifically to Jews of long lineage who claim to have greater ownership of Torah than descendants of more recent converts. However, the specific application is most likely the result of chaining together vorts rather than intrinsic to the metaphor, which challenges any claim to Torah based on anything but personal learning.

Here there seems no denying the prescriptive intent. Those who teach Torah ought to emulate G-d by giving no preference on the basis of preexisting conditions, *yichus* among them.

Tanchuma culminates with Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's inspirational statement that the three ornamental edges – on the Aron, the Kaporet, and the Shulchan – represent the Three Crowns of Rulership, Priesthood, and Torah. David took the first, and Aharon the second, but the Crown of Torah is highest of all and remains open to all.

This statement concedes the persistence of inequality – by implication (and halakhah), the other two crowns are no longer open to all (whether as the result of destiny or achievement is not clear). It tries to diminish the concession by establishing that Torah is the greatest crown. But monarchy and priesthood are not insignificant.

A similar point can be made by noting that the overall construction of the Mishkan (as opposed to its tent specifically, which is also called “mishkan”) is also commanded in the third person plural – **ועשו לי** – **מקדש**. If the moral of **ועשו** is equal share, and yet unequal contributions entitle one to unequal shares of components other than the Aron, is the overall derashah coherent?

The second treatment Nechamah Leibowitz cited responds to a different equity challenge. Or HaChayyim 25:10 addresses the practice rather than the study of Torah.

“They must make an Ark” - . . .

“This is perhaps intended to hint that the “body” of Torah cannot endure except within the collective of all Israel,

and no existent in the world can do all the roots of Torah,

and this is the proof for you: If he is a kohen, he cannot fulfill the giving of the 24 priestly gifts, or the redemption of the firstborn, etc.”;

if he is an Israelite, he cannot fulfill the positive commandments involved in sacrificing sacrifices and their laws, which involve numerous positive commandments;

and so too the Levite.

But in the collective of all Israel, the collective of all the roots of Torah can be fulfilled.

That's why it said **ועשו**, in the plural.

But regarding the other details of the Ark it spoke in the singular,

because to fabricate the utensils of Torah, meaning its learners and strivers and prerequisites?, those can endure from one person.

– “ועשו ארון” –

טעם שבארון שינה ה' את דברו הטוב מכל

הכלים,

שבכולם אמר “ועשית שולחן”, “ועשית מנורת

וגו”, “ואת המשכן תעשה ועשית את המזבח

עצי וגו”;

וגם בפרטי הארון עצמו גמר אומר בנוכח, דכתיב

“וצפית אותו”, “ויצקת לו”, “ועשית בדי וגו”;

אולי שרמז שאין גופה של תורה יכול להתקיים

אלא בכללות כל ישראל,

ואין מציאות בעולם יכול עשות כל עקרי התורה,

זזה לך האות:

אם הוא כהן, הרי זה אינו מקיים נתינת כ”ד

מתנות כהונה ופדיון בכור וכו’;

ואם הוא ישראל, הרי אינו יכול לקיים מצות עשה

שבהקרבת הקרבנות ודיניהם אשר רבו מצות

עשה שבהם;

וכן לוי;

ובכללות כל ישראל יקיימו כללות עקרי התורה,

לזה אמר “ועשו” לשון רבים,

ובשאר פרטי תיקוני הארון אמר לשון יחיד,

כי לתקן כלי התורה, שהם לומדיה ועמליה

והכנותיה, יכולין להתקיים מאדם אחד:

Or Hachayyim believed that every Jew must be necessary for Torah. But like Tanchuma, he acknowledges that this demand cannot apply to everything within Torah. In stark contrast to Tanchuma, he believes that his form of equity need not apply to the study of Torah.

It's also important to understand that Or HaChayyim is not saying “separate but equal” – equality is not his moral stake, but rather necessity. So long as one is needed, it does not matter how much more important someone else's work is – necessity is sufficient for equity.

Tanchuma and Or HaChayyim each read the construction of the Mishkan as a symbol, not as a metaphor. That is to say, they look for all the meanings compatible with their own experiences. Reading them, I resonate strongly with the way they seize on elements of the symbol to affirm the importance of universal access to Torah or the necessity of every human being. Those interpretations are far from obvious if the philosophic commitments are not compelling.

At the same time, I acknowledge that from within my own experience, their interpretations leave many inequalities unchallenged, and too easily distinguish between equality and equity. I recognize that these complacencies seem fully compatible with the data of the symbol. It is therefore my responsibility to explain why the construction commands vary from singular to plural.

Because symbols are so undefined, so deliberately open to subjectivity, how often are we genuinely open to discovering meanings in them that we don't already agree with? Can we be accountable to them?

I prefer to think yes. At the same time, I valorize the construction of new meanings that fully and genuinely match the data and are fully consonant with our deepest intuitions.

Shabbat Shalom!

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