

## CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חירות ואחריות

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## THE FIRE LAST TIME. AND ALMOST EVERY TIME

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There is no way to keep religion away from politics and psychology. G-d is willHe-nilHe involved in human affairs, because every human being who has or claims a relationship with Him affects other human beings. Moreover, we all have expectations of Him, and our sense of self and our position in society are profoundly affected by His choices to fulfill or frustrate those expectations.

Rashi and rabbinic interpretations generally construct a narrative of the Mishkan's construction which is all about managing those expectations.

The Jewish people expect G-d to respond to their overwhelming response to His appeal by sending a perceptible or even tangible expression of His presence. They cheerfully watch their volunteer artisans and engineers make the components, expecting that as soon as the parts are done, the whole will miraculously erect itself, as Rashi himself later expects the Third Temple to descend flaming from Heaven. But the parts just lie there.

So they go to the craftsmen, and tell them angrily: "What are you waiting for?! Build it, and He will come!" Truth be told, the craftsmen might prefer it this way. So they cheerfully set up their blocks and tackles and go about putting up the walls – which promptly fall right back down. And again, and again.

The craftsmen cannot bear the possibility that their work is inadequate. So they don't abandon the structure; they admit defeat and bring it, still in kit form, to Mosheh (Shemot 39:33). But the people have no such personal investment, and there is much grumbling as they trail behind. Here is the Midrash Tanchuma's retelling:

כיון שגמרו מלאכת המשכן – היו יושבין ומצפין  
אימתי תבא שכינה ותשרה בו  
והיו מצטערין הכל מפני שלא שרתה שכינה עליו,  
מה עשו? הלכו להם אצל חכמי לב. אמרו להן:  
ומה אתם יושבין העמידו אתם את המשכן ותשרה שכינה בינותינו!  
היו מבקשין להעמידו, ולא היו יודעין, ולא יכולין להעמידו,  
וכשהן חושבין להעמידו – הוא נופל,  
מיד הלכו להם אצל בצלאל ואהליאב. אמרו להם:  
בואו אתם והעמידו המשכן שאתם עשיתם אותו שמא על ידכם ראוי  
לעמוד!  
מיד התחילו להעמידו ולא יכלו,

התחילו מסיחין ומרננין ואומרים:

ראו מה עשה לנו בן עמרם!

שהוציא את ממונינו במשכן הזה והכניס אותנו לכל הטורח הזה  
ואמר לנו כי הקדוש ברוך הוא יורד מן העליונים ושורה בתוך יריעות  
עזים

*When they finished the work of the Mishkan – they were anticipating:*

*When will the Presence come and inhabit it?*

*Everyone was suffering because the Presence had not come to inhabit it.  
What did they do? They went to "the wise of heart" (craftsmen). They said  
to them:*

*Why are you just sitting there?! Go erect the Mishkan and the Presence  
will dwell among us!?*

*They tried to erect it; but they did not know how;*

*when they thought they had it erected – it would fall.*

*Immediately they went to Betzalel and Oholiav (the architect and designer).*

*They said to them:*

*You come and erect the Mishkan that you have made! Perhaps it will be  
fit to stand via your hands!*

*Immediately (Betzalel and Oholiav) tried to erect it, but they were unable.*

*So (the people) began complaining:*

*Look what the Son of Amram has done to us!*

*He spent all our money on this Mishkan,*

*and put us to all this bother,*

*saying to us that the Holy Blessed One would descend from Above and  
dwell in goatskin curtains!*

Why does the Mishkan keep falling down? Not because of any flaw in His design, or their skill. Rather, because Mosheh was frustrated that he had no tangible part in the work, so G-d ensured that the final stage would be his, with more than a symbolic ribbon-cutting.

ולמה לא היו יכולין להעמידו,

אלא שהיה משה מיצר על שלא נשתתף הוא עמם במלאכת המשכן,

כי צד הנדבה נתנה על ידי ישראל

והמלאכה נעשית ע"י בצלאל ואהליאב וחכמי לב

*Why were they unable to erect it?*

*Because Mosheh was distressed that he had not participated with them in  
the work of the Mishkan*

*because the materials were contributed by the Jewish people*

*and the labor was done by Betzalel and Oholiav and the wise of heart.*

*Because Mosheh was distressed, G-d hid the method from them and they  
were unable to erect it.*

Yet the task that G-d leaves Mosheh is beyond his, or for that matter any single human being's, physical capacities (unless Mosheh was a giant, which some midrashim suggest). So G-d tells him to playact, to pretend as if he is lifting the components – “Do something with your hands and make it appear as if you were erecting it” – while He miraculously causes the Mishkan to erect, but assures him that the plaque will still have his name on it. Thus in Shemot 40:17 “the Mishkan was erected,” whereas in 40:18 “Mosheh erected the Mishkan.”

Now the Mishkan is standing. Mosheh, and only Mosheh knows that the Divine presence is there. The people expect that G-d's Presence will make itself known, but nothing at all happens, at least so far as they can tell. Mosheh goes through the seven day inauguration ritual, taking the Mishkan apart and reconstructing it each day – and each day, nothing new happens. Why?

Mosheh realizes: G-d was concerned for My frustration, but I should be thinking about Aharon – how would he feel if he had no part in this? So Mosheh tells the people (Rashi Vayikra 9:23):

אהרן אחי כדאי וחשוב ממני,  
שע"י קרבנותיו ועבודתו תשרה שכינה בכם  
ותדעו שהמקום בחר בו

*Aharon my brother is more fit and worthy than I  
because it is through his sacrifices and service that the Presence will dwell  
among you*

*and you will know that the Omnipresent chose him*

Aharon now goes to perform His service. Like the people, he expects – everyone has been told this, by Mosheh! that his service will be efficacious, and G-d's Presence will descend as he concludes the final ritual. But nothing happens. So it's his turn to complain:

ידוע אני שכנס עלי המקום בשבילי לא ירדה שכינה לישראל  
כך עשה לי משה אחי

שנכנסתי ונתביישתי ולא ירדה שכינה לישראל  
מיד נכנס משה עמו ובקשו רחמים  
וירדה שכינה לישראל

לכן: נאמר ויבא משה ואהרן אל אהל מועד.

*I know that the Omnipresent is angry with me.*

*It is because of me that the Presence has not descended to Israel.*

*My brother Mosheh did this to me!*

*I entered the Mishkan, and I was shamed, and the Divine Presence did  
not descend to the Jews.*

*Immediately Mosheh entered with him, and they prayed,  
and the Divine Presence descended to the Jews*

*Thus Scripture says: “Mosheh and Aharon came to Ohel Moed.”*

At long last, “a fire came out from Heaven, and consumed on the altar” (Vayikra 10:2). The people experience the giddy mixture of joy and terror they have been awaiting; Betzalel's craftsmanship and Aharon's Priesthood are confirmed; Mosheh is involved at every step of the process. Everything is hunky-dory at last.

But we have come a long way from Mosheh's first experience with Divine fire, which consumed nothing.

In Vayikra 9:22, Aharon descends “from making” the sacrifices. The straightforward reading is that he descends physically from the altar. One *musar* step straight down: He descends from the spiritual high of the sacrifice: One spiral *Chassidic* step further: He descends spiritually **as a result of making the sacrifices.**

In Chassidic literature, Aharon's descent is the inevitable consequence of his effort to bring the people up. Perhaps Chazal had the same reading, but interpreted it differently. Aharon's sacrifice was only necessary because Mosheh realized he was frustrated. Otherwise, the Divine fire would have descended before there was anything on the altar to consume.

Satisfying Aharon's expectations has tragic consequences. Because Aharon's sons also had expectations – after all, they were given uniforms! But they feel that it is He a late for complaints – fire has already descended from Heaven, and no one else feels that anything is still lacking. So they try to involve themselves, and another fire comes down from Heaven, and consumes them.

Perhaps Mosheh's experience of pure innocence was possible only when he was a shepherd in the Wilderness, when there was only one man, who came with no expectations, only a sense of wonder. In society, G-d is always a “consuming fire” (Devarim 4:24).

Wonder also requires expectations: what attracts Mosheh is that the shrub is not being burnt up **even though he is expecting the fire to consume it.** (This is parallel to T.S. Eliot's argument that creativity can only take place in the context of tradition.) What Mosheh lacks is expectations **for himself.** It does not occur to him that private access to G-d can be a source of power. He has been there, done that, and has no interest in unretiring. This is why Mosheh is the right person for the job.

We sometimes wish that all our religious leaders were Mosheh Rabbeinu the shepherd, learning Torah with pure spiritual wonder and no thought for themselves. There is good reason for that; human ambition makes G-d's fire consuming, and fire spreads. Many leaders are not self-aware enough to empathize with the ambitions of others, let alone to deliberately make room for those ambitions to be satisfied. People with enormous Torah talents end up consumed by their own ambitions, like Nadav and Avihu.

But to get Mosheh to take the job of redeeming us from Egypt, G-d has to rekindle his ambitions. Religion needs the yetzer hora of ambition, as it needs every other human drive. Otherwise Torah becomes disconnected from society, and thereby from justice.

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