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PARADISE LOST, AGAIN AND AGAIN

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The Book of Shemot begins with people and ends with a building.

If G-d were an entrepreneur, the narrative in between would be obvious.

Everything began with high ideals. Names, not numbers. People (women) cleverly defying the evil commands of an otherwise all-powerful ruler. This nation would be different, because it would be driven by its mission rather than by its desire for power. Everything would be about transparency and empowerment.

But reality intruded. Survival (continuity) became the first priority. There's no way to fulfill ideals if you don't exist. Survival led to growth; growth led to bureaucracy; bureaucracy led to hierarchy, and hierarchy led to an exquisite corporate headquarters for the (male) bigwigs and an exclusive inner sanctum for the (male) CEO.

We need to explain why and to what extent this interpretation is misleading.

In a recent Lehrhaus posting, Dr. Giti Bendheim suggested that the Mishkan's microcosm extended beyond its walls, to its environment, with the pillars of fire and cloud representing the sun and the moon. But (my suggestion) the pillar of fire came at night, and the pillar of cloud by day. So the Mishkan was out of phase with the actual world.

The last paragraph of Shemot has the people focused on those pillars, not on the building. No one at all is permitted in the building.

That paragraph is placed there achronologically. In other words, the book doesn't just happen to end here; this section is placed here as a thematic capstone.

It's pretty clear why. The chronological narrative ends with the actual construction of the mishkan. The Torah ends its description of the construction with the words "*vayikhal Mosheh et hamelakhab*," "and Mosheh completed the work". This seems an obvious allusion to the completion of the world in Bereisheet 2: "*Vayikhulu hashomayim veba'aretz vekhol tzeva'am. Vayikhal Elokim bayom hashvi'i melakhto...*" What follows is Shabbat.

Sefer Shemot therefore ends on Shabbat. It also ends in Eden, which here as in Bereisheet lies past guardian cherubs. But it combines the first and second Creation narratives. The people have sinned, and so they are not allowed into Eden, or Shabbat.

The Mishkan is not utopia. It is, rather, a reminder that we have been justly exiled from utopia and that in our world things are often opposite of the way they ought to be.

But Shabbat is mentioned three other times toward the end of Shemot. Each previous time a variant of "*vayikhal*", meaning completion, appears. To reconstruct the Mishkan, we need to unpack each of these connections.

The first is to 31:12-18. G-d is quoted as telling Mosheh five beautiful verses relating to Shabbat. "Then He gave to Mosheh – as He completed (*kekhaloto*) speaking with him at Har Sinai – the two tablets of testimony, tablets written with the finger of Elokim". This passage occurs immediately after the first set of instructions for building the Mishkan, and immediately before the sin of the Golden Calf.

Here again the placement seems thematic rather than chronological. Shabbat is not the tenth of the Ten commandments – so why would G-d be speaking of it when He finished speaking with Mosheh at Sinai?

The second is to 34:27 – 35:3. Mosheh returns from Sinai with the Second Tablets. His face is shining, so that the people are afraid to approach him. Mosheh calls to them, and Aharon returns, bringing the nesi'im with him, and finally the people follow. Mosheh commands them everything that G-d spoke with him on Mount Sinai. When Mosheh finished (*vayikhal*) speaking with them, he put a veil on his face. Mosheh would put on the veil whenever he went to the Ohel Moed to speak with Hashem; he would exit with the veil still off, so that the people could see his face shining; and then he would replace the veil until the next time. After all this, we read that Mosheh gathered all the people and taught them about . . . Shabbat, in two verses.

Here again, the placement is thematic rather than chronological. There is no reason in the text to assume that this was the first thing taught of “everything that G-d spoke with him”; Shabbat is not the first commandment.

The parallelism between these two sections seems clear. Shabbat is presented as the last thing G-d says to Mosheh, and the first thing Mosheh teaches the people.

The third connection is to 35:30 – 36:7. After Mosheh gives instructions for the materials and construction of the Mishkan, the people bring more than enough, and show no sign of stopping. So Mosheh sends a proclamation through the camp and the people *finish* (*vayikalei*) bringing. Here there is no explicit mention of Shabbat. However, we are told repeatedly that the people are being stopped from doing *melakhab*, and finally, that the *melakhab* they have already done is more than sufficient to make the mishkan. When there has been more than enough *melakhab*, it is time for Shabbat.

This section parallels the end of the book. Shabbat happens when the *melakhab* needed for the Mishkan is done. But the people’s *melakhab* is not a final completion, and they cannot tell by themselves when they have done enough; they would go on forever if Mosheh doesn’t tell them to stop.

If the Mishkan ultimately represents an inaccessible Eden/Shabbat, it seems reasonable to suggest that each of these episodes offers an explanation for that continued inaccessibility. One or more may also reflect a lost opportunity to make it past the revolving sword.

In this schema, the first episode is straightforward. When the Torah is fully transmitted to human beings, i.e. when G-d finishes speaking to Mosheh – His work of Creation is finally done. Thus His closing words are “this is an eternal sign between Me and the Children of Israel that Hashem made Heavens and earth in six days, but on the seventh day, He rested *vayinafash*”. But the work is actually not complete, because Mosheh is not fully human when he receives it, and he breaks the Tablets rather than transmit the Torah to sinful mortals. Rabbinic tradition seems to favor the position that this was not a lost opportunity, but rather an inevitability, as G-d congratulates Mosheh for breaking them, and He delays giving Mosheh the Tablets until the people have sinned.

The second episode is more complex. This time Mosheh apparently brings Tablets all the way down – but appearances may be misleading. His personal tent becomes an Ohel Moed, or a proto-Mishkan, and perhaps the Tablets stay there until the actual Mishkan is built. Mosheh does not seem fully human after this descent, as indicated by his shining countenance. Aharon is the first human willing to approach him, and only then the people. From then on, Mosheh moves back and forth between worlds. When he has new Torah to transmit, he lets the people see his face; but whenever he relates to human beings exclusively, he wears a veil. The people’s reaction to Mosheh here parallels their unwillingness or inability to hear G-d directly during Revelation. Perhaps if they had rushed en masse to greet him when he descended, the Torah would have been accessible without hierarchy.

In the third episode, the people are given the chance to build their own Ohel Moed. It turns out that they have the same creative capacities as Mosheh, at least collectively, and therefore they can create a Heavens and earth. But not quite – they have no innate sense of limits, and if it were left to them, they would produce infinite components and never a whole. So a hierarchy is created to channel their raw creativity, and the final product is inaccessible to them.

Whenever the Torah describes a human failure, and a consequence of that failure, we have a choice. We can treat the failure as a caution against overreaching; or we can seek to overcome or mitigate the consequence.

Each of these options has precedents. We are fairly well agreed that building towers to assault the Heavens is simply a bad idea, and Esperanto has not really taken off. On the other hand, there is essentially no halakhic or hashkafic opposition to taking painkillers during childbirth.

The hardest and in a sense least coherent option is to do both simultaneously – to seek to overcome consequences while tempering our ambitions by acknowledging that they are generated by ineluctable aspects of human nature. Yet with regard to hierarchy and authority in Torah, that may be what is needed. And paradoxically, we can hope that acknowledging our limits enable us to transcend them.