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THE MORTGAGED MISHKAN

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אֵלֶּה פְּקוּדֵי הַמִּשְׁכָּן מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדוּת

These are the *pekudim* of the *mishkan*, the *mishkan haedut*

The opening phrases of Parashat Pekudei are a feast for the philologically fascinated. Many mistakenly presume that philological fanaticism pairs particularly well with a penchant for *peshat*, but this is not so: the best practitioners of *peshat* and *derash* each mine syntax and semantics maximally.

In our case, every kind of analysis must begin with the apparent redundancy of the word *הַמִּשְׁכָּן* – why not write more concisely “these are the *pekudim* of the *mishkan haedut*”?

Midrash HaGadol cites an interpretation that there were in fact two independent structures known as *mishkan*.

מלמד ששני משכנות עשו,
משכן שכניה ומשכן לבית מדרשו של משה.

This teaches that they made two *mishkans*,
one *mishkan* for the *Shekhinah* and one *mishkan* for Mosheh’s
House of Study.

This coordinates with a similar identification of the *ohel moed* that Shemot 33:7 locates *outside the camp* as Moshe’s House of Study. The *mishkan* discussed in our parashah is presumably the one for the *Shekhinah*.

This interpretation does not actually solve the redundancy issue. Rather, following the Tanna Rabbi Yishmael’s principle that “The Torah speaks as humans do”, it accepts this structure (=apposition) as a legitimate if inefficient mode of speech.

Ramban, following the French pashtan Rabbeinu Yosef Bekhor Shor, works with the same principle, but identifies a different need for disambiguation. *Mishkan* by itself can refer to the curtains alone, but *mishkan haedut* refers to “the building in its entirety, which is the *mishkan* made for the Tablets of the *edut*/testimony”.

In standard readings, *mishkan* has one of two semantic implications: “conduit” and “container”. In other words, the *mishkan* is what causes Hashem to be *shokhein* in the physical world. The question is whether it is the conduit that enables Hashem to be *shokhein* throughout this world, or rather the

container that prevents Hashem from being *shokhein* anywhere else in this world.

One standard approach to that question is that the *mishkan* was intended to be a conduit, but was shifted to being a container after the sin of the Golden Calf. This approach is rooted in Hashem telling the Jews after that sin that they would now be led by an angel rather than His Presence, and in many Biblical statements and stories about the danger of exposure to the Divine.

One strand of midrashic readings roots this in the word *edut*/testimony. They contend that the *mishkan* served as testimony that G-d forgave the Jews for the sin of the Calf. This can logically apply only to the post-sin, “container” *mishkan*. This can provide another way of reading the doubling of *mishkan* in the opening of Pekudei as a disambiguation – it tells us that it is referring only to the post-sin conception of the *mishkan*.

It follows that the destroyed *mishkan* is evidence that G-d no longer forgives us for that sin, or that we have engaged in new sins too numerous and/or serious to be forgiven, at least without the intervention of a live Mosheh Rabbeinu.

Rabbinic readers naturally ask: Without a *mishkan*, where does the *Shekhinah* go? The answer is “into exile” = *שְׁכִינָתָא בְּגִלוּתָא* – but exile here has two possible meanings. If the *mishkan* was a conduit, then the *Shekhinah* is now exiled from this world. Most likely it is trapped in Heaven. But if the *mishkan* was a container, why aren’t we all dead of Divine overexposure? The standard approach is that the *Shekhinah* accompanied the Jewish people into exile, but it cannot be with us in exile in the same way, with the same immediacy, that it was in Jerusalem. But this seems to me an implicit acknowledgement that his approach is not an easy fit with the texts.

One interpretation in Midrash Tanchuma argues against all the above-cited interpretations that the repeated word *mishkan* is referring to each of two separate structures.

א"ר שמואל:

שהב"ה עתיד להתמשכן ב' פעמים,
חרבן ראשון וחרבן שני,

ולפיכך אמר משכן ב' פעמים.

Said R. Shmuel.

Because the Beit HaMikdash will eventually be seized as collateral twice, namely the first and second *churbans*. Therefore it says *mishkan* twice.

This Tanchuma conflates *mishkan* and *mikdash*, or put differently, it understands the signifier *mishkan* as pointing to the signified *mikdash*. At the same time, it understands *mishkan* as having two simultaneous semantic senses – “place where G-d dwells” and “object put up as collateral against default on covenant”.

The translation of *mishkan* as collateral is difficult to accept because, so far as I can tell, that root does not have that meaning in Biblical Hebrew, only in Rabbinic Hebrew. One might argue that the semantic undergirding is the same – collateral/*mashkon* is something that the borrower causes to dwell in the lender's house – but nonetheless it's hard to introduce that specific context into our text's use of *mishkan*.

My question however is whether that translation nonetheless unlocks an understanding of the *mishkan* that is well-rooted contextually but would otherwise not have been brought into the light.

The *mishkan* is a massively expensive national building. Some part of the expense contributed genuinely to aesthetics, but some of it seems primarily like a way to conveniently store large quantities of valuable goods while maintaining a practical plan for their rapid removal from enemy threats. The *mikdash* of course was not portable, but kings nonetheless used the precious metals of the building as a reserve for international bribery, sometimes to the outrage of prophets and rabbis.

Let's accept the justice of that outrage and assume that donations to the *mishkan* or *mikdash* were intended to permanently remain part of the structure. Let's also assume that these donations went well beyond what was necessary to maintain aesthetic standards. From a religious rather than political perspective, what is the point of the Temple's wealth?

Here the Tanchuma may be useful. According to the Tanchuma, the *mishkan* and *mikdash* were collateral, and therefore needed to be in proper proportion to whatever was being asked of G-d by the people. They were signs that the Jews were willing to guarantee their observance of the Covenant, and trusted G-d not to seize it unjustly.

What made the *mishkan* valuable to G-d was not the wealth it embodied, of which He had of course no need, but rather the commitment and trust it embodied, that His people were willing to put so large a share of their wealth in His control.

If this is correct, a core aspect of the *mishkan*'s sanctity or *mikdashness* is our recognition of its contingency. What makes our building of it religious is our acknowledgment that He may eventually dispose of it.

The Tanchuma is based on the repeated word *mishkan*, which is transposed onto the two Temples. If one focuses on this textual hook, It becomes easy to say that the verse assures is that there will only be two destructions. But if one focuses instead on the theological message, we have to say that a Temple's meaningfulness is contingent on our continuing to deserve it. I think this is true of other stages of Redemption as well. All the riches we create should be seen as that much more collateral.

Shabbat shalom!

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