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D'var Torah on Par'shat P'kudey: "Filled with Pride"

(Presented on the eve of our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration with the congregation)

Here is a tantalizing quotation from the most recent winner of the Pritzker Prize in Architecture, the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki: "Like the universe, architecture comes out of nothing, becomes something and eventually becomes nothing again."

As soon as I saw the quote, I said to myself: This is what the Torah portion P'kudey is trying to tell us. The portion sums up the elaborate details of the Mishkan, which is the ancient Israelites' architectural tour de force, by informing us that: Moses gave a full accounting; took pride in the Israelites' work; blessed them for their work; directed them as they set up the structure; helped them to ritually dedicate the structure; then stood back as the cloud of God's glory filled the space, essentially supplanting the space, essentially rendering the entire structure superfluous.

At every step of the process, the Book of Exodus borrows the language of Creation from the opening chapters of Genesis: *vaya'as* - "then he made"; *vay'chal* - "then he completed"; *vateikhel* - "then was completed"; *vay'varekh* - "then he blessed." Every commentator points out the same thing: The echoing of the language of

Genesis suggests that what Moses and the Israelites have accomplished with the constructing of the Mishkan is none other than an *homage* to the very creation of the universe. The Mishkan is a microcosmic universe that acknowledges Israel's humble, grateful position in God's greater plan. Like the universe – and like Isozaki's concept of architecture – it comes from nothing, becomes something, and eventually becomes nothing again as it is filled to overflowing with God's much greater essence.

To my mind, there are three key verses in the parashah, all of them placed toward the end. Together, they convey Moses's exemplary leadership, his humility, and his pride in the achievement of his people.

The first is Chapter 39, verse 32: "Thus was completed all the work of the Mishkan of the Tent of Meeting. The Israelites did so; just as the Eternal had commanded Moses, so they did."

The Kotzker points out that throughout the sequence of commandments regarding the building of the overall structure and its myriad appurtenances, Moses is said to have done the work. Now the Torah tells us that the Israelites themselves performed the tasks. The Kotzker lovingly uses this discrepancy to teach us that of course Israelites did the actual work, and that it was Moses who served as the

*ruach hachayah*, the “living spirit” behind the entire project. Nonetheless, Moses got out of the way and let the people pour their various talents into the actual work. They gave him credit, *and* he gave *them* credit. The result was a project that secondarily built something of meaning, but primarily built a sacred community; a community of former slaves who learned how to cooperate for their own greater good.

The second significant verse is Chapter 39, verse 43: “And when Moses saw that they had performed all the tasks – as the Eternal had commanded, so they had done – Moses blessed them.”

What was Moses’s blessing to them? Rashi says it was this: “May it be God’s will that the *shekhinah* prevail over the works of your hands.”

The K’tav Sofer (the 19<sup>th</sup> century commentator from Pressburg, Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Schreiber) wonders whether or not this blessing by Moses is unnecessary, given that way back in Chapter 25, verse 8 (in Par’shat T’rumah) God has already promised that “if you build me a sanctuary, then I will dwell among you.” (I know: Field of Dreams, Torah version.) So that because the people have come through with their side of the bargain, God will necessarily come through as

well, and there is no need for Moses to add his own blessing. After all, who does Moses think he is? Certainly not God!

Rather, says the K'tav Sofer, Moses's *y'hi ratzon* – “May it be according to the will” – refers not to God's will but to the will of the people themselves. That is to say, “May it be *your* will, O Israel, to want God's presence to prevail over your hard work.” In this way, Moses blesses his people with the will to have lofty intentions; with the desire to have their own efforts blessed; with the ability to do this very materialistic work while nonetheless focusing on the higher purpose of it all. To keep their eye on the prize, which is not the Mishkan, but their relationship to God, and thus to one another, and eventually to the world at large.

Moses blesses them for having come this far without regressing to their Golden Calf-making selves. His only hope is that they can keep growing in fits and starts toward a collective sense of their true worth and purpose, without falling back into petty behaviors and motives.

*Vay'varekh otam Moshe.* “And Moses blessed them.” Does Moses really think they can keep going forward without relapsing? No. But he acts as if he does, and this shows his remarkable generosity of leadership. He helps his people to see themselves as better than they actually are, and thus to become better than they actually were.

The third of the three key verses is Chapter 40, verses 33-35, nearly at the end of the Book of Exodus: “When Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the Eternal filled the Mishkan. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of the Eternal filled the Mishkan.”

Here the great 12<sup>th</sup> century French commentator, the B’khor Shor, helps us understand this mysterious passage. He suggests that the secret is in the syntax. By itself, the Hebrew word order is confusing. The text reads *ukh’vod ado-nai maley et hamishkan* – “The Presence of the Eternal filled the Mishkan.” But it would make more sense if it read “the Mishkan filled up with the Presence of the Eternal” – *v’hamishkan maley kh’vod ado-nai*. As if to say, the people set up the contraption, plugged it in, turned it on, and it proceeded to do what it was supposed to do. But, says the B’khor Shor, the Mishkan was actually not supposed to do *anything*, least of all act upon the Divine Presence. Had the text been syntacted logically, it would have suggested that the Mishkan itself had brought God’s *kavod*, God’s essential reality, into itself, into the perimeter of the Tent. If that were the case, *khas v’shalom*, then first of all God’s reality would have been containable, and thus finite (like a calf of gold); and second of all that God’s essence could be manipulated (again, like a calf of gold).

As the verse is actually written, however, it teaches that God's reality is infinitely great, and that the Mishkan is brought, as it were, inside *God's* totality, and not the other way around. The telos of the episode, spanning five huge par'shiot, is God, and likewise a *relationship* with God, and *not the architectural triumph*. The architecture, having served its purpose, reverts to nothing.

Thus no one, not even Moses, can use the Mishkan as a device to pin God down. Not even Moses – and not any leader subsequent to Moses – can walk into that space and demand an audience with the Divine. In fact, it's the opposite, as we shall see in the very first words of next week's portion. It is God who does the inviging, not us. First God calls and waits for a response. *Vayikra el Moshe*. Then God speaks, but only simple words of commandment and clarification. *Vay'daber elav mey-ohel mo'ed*. Simple words of meeting, as Buber might say.

And even then, God does not speak, as it were, until and unless Moses demonstrates to his people that he himself is sufficiently humble to defer to the Divine call and not pretend that he himself is divine. Moses shows his people how to listen – humbly. Modestly. Graciously. Gratefully. He shows them how to meet the divine in one another, in the midst of that great tent called the sacred community.

The B'khor Shor closes his commentary on Exodus with this touching observation: "For it is good manners for a person to begin by calling out to another with whom he wishes to speak, so that that person will know that it is he to whom the other person is speaking." That is how we speak to one another in the imaginary Tent of Meeting: We call to one another, as if it were the very Divine Self who was issuing the call. And when we do so, we allow ourselves to be filled with the pride of our achievement, as if the Cloud itself were filling us with blessing.