



MIDEI CHODESH

B'CHODSHO

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What Comes First?

The Talmud tells a fascinating tale, but doesn't really answer the question...

The rabbis are puzzled by an apparent contradiction in the Torah text. In Parshat Teruma, HaShem issues clear instructions concerning the construction of the Sanctuary. He first commands the fashioning of the *Klei HaMishkan*, the utensils to be contained in the Sanctuary. Only then, does HaShem turn His attention to the building of the *Mishkan*, the Sanctuary structure, itself.

When the Israelites carry out God's instructions, however, the order of construction is reversed. The Torah testifies in Parshat Va'yakhel that the people first create the *Mishkan*. Only once the structural components of the Sanctuary are complete, do they begin to fashion the *keilim*.

Why, ask the rabbis, do the people disregard God's clear instructions? If they were commanded to first produce the utensils, why do they begin with the *Mishkan*?

By way of an answer, the Talmud tells a fascinating tale—a narrative that beautifully weaves the name of the *Mishkan*'s chief artisan, Betzalel, into the unfolding events.

The Talmud explains that Moshe initially instructs Betzalel to perform his appointed tasks according to the order found in Parshat Teruma; to fashion the *keilim* before constructing the *Mishkan*.

Betzalel, however, objects:

It is the way of the world, Moshe, to build a home before creating its furnishings. Why are you instructing me to do the reverse? Absent a structure, where shall I put the utensils that I create?

Moshe responds:

שְׁמָא בְּצַל־אֱלֹהִים וַיִּדְעַת...*Could it be, Betzalel, that you surreptitiously overheard God's commandments to me, while you were hiding in the "shadow of God" [בצל א-ל], hence the name [בצלאל]? You are correct and I am mistaken. God actually commanded us to build the Mishkan first and, only then, the keilim.*

While this Talmudic aggada underscores the order in which the *Mishkan* and its



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furnishings are ultimately created, it begs the fundamental question. If, all along, Hashem wanted the *Mishkan* to be constructed before its *Keilim*, why is the opposite sequence recorded in *Parshat Teruma*? Why are the original commandments concerning the *Mishkan* stated in mirror image to God's will?

I believe that an answer to our question can be determined if we accept two basic postulates:

1. The *Mishkan* and its details are designed to teach us critical symbolic lessons concerning our overall relationship with God and His law.

2. Whenever the Torah details a sequence twice and reverses the order in the second rendition, the text is informing us that, on some level, the order is inconsequential.¹

Armed with these two postulates, we can perhaps explain the Torah's shifting

1 A perfect example of this rule emerges, appropriately enough, from the Exodus narrative in the Torah. In describing the ritual to take place on the night of the Exodus, the text states that blood is to be placed "on the two doorposts and on the lintel" of the Israelites' homes. In a recap of this ritual, however, the text states that the blood is to be placed on "the lintel and the two doorposts"-reversing the original order of placement. The rabbis explain that this reversal of order actually conveys that the order is inconsequential. It did not matter if the blood was placed first on the doorposts or first on the lintel. Either sequence was ultimately acceptable.]

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description of the *Mishkan*'s construction. On a practical level, the *Mishkan* must be created before its *keilim*. On a philosophical level, however, the Torah presents both alternative sequences in order to address a critical religious query. Which is more important in our relationship with HaShem; the big picture or the details? What takes priority, the overall structure [the *Mishkan*] or the specifics [the *keilim*]?

The Torah's answer? Both are equally important.

On the one hand, we should never lose sight of the Torah's overall goal: to shape our lives into vehicles for *Kiddush HaShem*. The Torah enables us, and challenges us, to lead sanctified lives; to bring God into the world through our words and deeds.

On the other hand, details are critically important. Through careful adherence to the details of our tradition we show our true loyalty to Hashem. Our care for the specifics, even when we don't fully understand them, demonstrates a willingness to devote daily time and energy to our relationship with the divine.

Both the overall goals and the details of our relationship with HaShem are equally important. Together, they form the essential balance meant to shape our lives.

There could be no better time of the year than the month of Nissan for shared reflection on this balance. As we prepare to re-connect with the first steps of our national journey on the Festival of Pesach, it is appropriate to ask: *How are we doing? How well are we maintaining, in our*

time, the balance between structure and detail that has marked our relationship with HaShem since the Exodus? Have our actions over this past year served to sanctify God's name? Have we been a people from whom HaKadosh Baruch Hu could "shep nachas?"

The answer, of course, is mixed. The challenges of this past year have revealed our strengths and our weaknesses, our ability to pull together and our tendency to pull apart. We've been selfless and selfish. Some among us have risked all in the service of others; while others have shown striking indifference to anyone outside their "*daled amot*." Some have maintained the details of Jewish observance while adhering to the societal rules protecting us all; while others- from all ends of the communal spectrum- have flaunted disobedience to those rules. Some have acted in ways that bring public pride and kavod to God's people; while others, well, not so much...

The advent of Nissan provides us with the impetus to take a step back and recalibrate the delicate balance so critical to our spiritual lives.

Mishkan...Keilim; Keilim...Mishkan...What takes priority, the structure or the details? The Torah's answer is abundantly clear. Both come first. Only if both ends of the spectrum are healthy and strong, will we rise to meet our eternal mission with success. ■

Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text," and "Unlocking the Haggada.