

D'var Torah for Parasha Pekudei, 12 March, 2016, by Bruce Oren

Shabbat shalom,

A couple of weeks ago when I stopped procrastinating and began writing this *drash*, I was immediately struck by the naked hubris of thinking that I had something significant to add to the body of Jewish thought or that I had anything at all to impart to this congregation. Standing before you now, I'm certain that my fears were well founded.

I'm godawful nervous up here. But thanks to BEKI's new, improved sound system, I can be nervous in dulcet tones at 80 decibels. If this sound system had been around 5,000 years ago, maybe God wouldn't have needed Moses. (*Southern accent*) "Let my people go, or I will *smite* y'all!" (C'mon, everyone knows that God's from the deep South.) No one smites anymore. We euphemistically "take out" our enemies. When I was a kid, "taking someone out" was going on a date — hoping to find someone to love — not so much "smiting" as becoming "smitten."

Before I go further, I want to allay any fears and assure everyone that despite the political season, I would never be so crass as to shoehorn Bernie Sanders' name into a *drash*. That one was for you, Angela.

So . . . what about this parasha, *Pekudei*? What's its significance, camped out here at the very end of Exodus? Well, *Pekudei* translates as "records or accounts," and reading the parasha, we're treated to detailed accounts of the construction of the *mishkan*, the tabernacle or portable sanctuary, a physical place on Earth where God communicates with Moses. It was the place where the People of Israel brought sacrifices to atone for sins or express gratitude to God. It was the religious and spiritual center of the Jewish people for more than 400 years – from the Egyptian exodus until the construction of the holy temple in Jerusalem, below which, tradition holds, still lies the *mishkan* buried millennia ago.

What might have been the *original* meaning of this text? Why include it in the *chumash*?

One reason might be that the vividly detailed account of the *mishkan*, its trappings and the priestly garments gives credence to its historic existence. Why would anyone go into all this detail for something that was the figment of collective imagination? The words, each letter painstakingly inscribed on parchment in countless sefer Torah, might serve as proof, for people in far away lands or people far in the future, that "Yes! This glorious tabernacle existed," and – yeah, it was pretty cool stuff – beautifully crafted from precious metals and exotic woods. This is *Pekudei* as a record — a kind of a New York Times magazine supplement without the slick photos.

The minute details also underscore the importance of the *mishkan*. If the Torah just said that the *mishkan* was there in the desert without describing its beauty and craftsmanship, it might as well be a cardboard box shipped by Amazon. The descriptives elevate the *mishkan* to a vessel worthy of the Creator.

And speaking of the King of the Universe: Notice that God gives *very* specific instructions. God brings order to a barbaric, chaotic world with notable specificity — whether it's the construction of the *mishkan*, the proper method of sacrifice or the laws of *kashrut*. This is not a god who shrugs: "Eh . . . whatever works for you."

What might *Pekudei* mean to us today?

Traditionally, many congregations use this parasha as a fundraising tool. Together with the accompanying haftarah about Solomon's construction of the first temple, *Pekudei* emphasizes the importance of a place to worship for Jews and the imperative to support our institutions. The vitality of our physical structures mirrors the strength of our community and reflects the depth of our individual faith. It also reminds us that – in the absence of the ancient *mishkan* – we're obligated to carefully and resolutely construct the space within our hearts where God can dwell.

Like much of the Torah, *Pekudei* can perhaps best be seen as a modern abstraction. A beautiful, thought-provoking painting in hues of blue and purple and scarlet. Way before Monet and the impressionists, far before Picasso, millennia before Jackson Pollock, the philosophers and scholars who put together the Torah were the original abstract artists. The idea of an invisible god is the very essence of abstraction. The gods of Mesopotamia, Canaan, Persia, Greece and Rome were destined to disappear. If your god is a corporal being, he, she or it had best make an occasional appearance or else. So how — and why — did Judaism survive the Scylla of belligerent neighbors and the inexorable Charybdis of time?

A strong case can be made that Judaism survived because it was the first abstract religion. We survived beyond the destruction of our Temple — beyond the loss of the *mishkan* — we survived by gleaning wisdom from the Torah and Talmud and finding spirituality in *tefillah*. I use “*tefillah*” instead of “prayer” — not only because it's *way* cooler to use Hebrew on the *bimah* (of course it is) — but also because “*prayer*” carries more baggage than “*tefillah*.” Prayer somehow implies the interaction of inferior and superior entities instead of the pure spiritual union of one's soul with the divine through *tefillah*.

Our prayerbook, the *siddur*, holds a special attraction for me. I can read Hebrew (in a fashion), but I understand little of what I'm reading. The accompanying English translation often seems fawning or maudlin or obsequious. But the cadence of the Hebrew and the beauty of the sounds of the language that I've heard since early childhood sometimes transport me to a spiritual place beyond verbal comprehension — a place much closer to meditation

than cognition.

Rabbi Joshua Cahan of the Solomon Schechter School of Westchester puts this way: “Most lessons meant to make the liturgy meaningful focus on finding the meaning in specific words. But if our liturgy is meant as performance, its power may be unconnected to its content. The *siddur* can function as a mantra, a hum that frees our minds to wander and enables us to hear the hidden voices of our hearts.” This abstract quality of *tefillah* may be the genius of Judaism. It's infused in our prayers and throughout Torah.

I'm an artist. A sculptor. A few years ago, when I was seeking an image for the story of Jonah, it struck me that being swallowed by a big fish and dragged down to the ocean depths wasn't a children's story. It was clearly a metaphor for depression. Who is more depressed than Jonah? Okay, Job, maybe. Probably. So why didn't the text just come out and say "depression" (aside from the fact that the DSM-5 hadn't hit the presses in the time of the prophets). The answer, I think, is that Judaism survived the ages because the text that became the Torah was carefully — brilliantly — distilled down over centuries to the very essence of abstract parable. Its abstract foundation allows the words to carry meaning to each of us across space and time.

The mysteries of the universe aren't hidden as a cruel joke. The mysteries of the universe are hidden because the answers aren't universal. Each of us must discover our own unique answers. This isn't a cosmic puzzle — the complexity is a direct result of our extraordinary individuality. Even overarching truths (like Do unto Others . . .) ultimately must be truly discovered, explored, digested and expressed in unique ways for each of us. The genius of the Torah is that after thousands of years it continues to be a vehicle that channels our self discovery. It's a timeless work of abstract art.

Judaism — organized religions of all faiths — are attempts to express abstract spirituality within the framework of ritual. So we always seek that magical moment — whether it's beneath soaring Gothic cathedral ceilings or within the warm embrace of BEKI's darkened sanctuary during *havdalah*.

Shabbat Shalom