

Vayikra 5782

ויקרא תשפ"ב

“Tis The Gift To Be Simple”

Rabbi Gordon Tucker, Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement, JTS



Parashat Vayikra inaugurates the book of Leviticus, the center(piece) of the Torah. Following immediately on the completion of the meticulously constructed Tabernacle (Mishkan) and its sumptuous appurtenances, it launches a set of instructions for how that sacred space was to function, and under whose authority. No wonder it was called in Rabbinic times “Torat Kohanim”—“the priests’ manual.” This week thus presents an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between that Mishkan—and all its successor institutions in Jewish life—and spiritual quests.

One of the first things to note is that the lavish nature of the Mishkan is not the only image the Torah knows of Israelite worship sites. The Mishkan’s Ark of the Covenant was richly overlaid with gold, with a solid gold covering that featured golden cherubim. Yet Deuteronomy, in its account of Moses replacing the shattered first Tablets, has God say simply and tersely, “make an ark of wood.” Though Deuteronomy does refer repeatedly to an exclusive place of worship that God will choose, no richly finished and furnished Temple is described. Moreover, the account of the Mishkan at the end of Exodus made much of the fact that it would be sanctified by the “Kavod”—God’s palpable Presence. But Deuteronomy pointedly calls the chosen site of worship “the place where God’s Name will dwell.” The late biblical scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky dubbed this the “relay station”; i.e., God’s Name is invoked there, and the offerings and prayers are conveyed from there to the God of Heaven.

We previously encountered this preference for the simple in the earlier chapters of Exodus. Consider what was said there about a proper altar:

Make for Me an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of wellbeing. . . .
And if you make for Me an altar of stones, do not

build it of hewn stones, for by wielding your tool upon them you have profaned them. (Exod. 20:21–22)

In this alternate vision, the altar is not to be created by skilled artisans and overlaid with polished bronze. Rather, it is to be simple earth. And if you are in a rocky place? Well then, a stone altar is OK, *provided it is not worked with a tool*. Otherwise, the tool will render it profane. Note well: the finishing tool is a *desacralizer*.

Solomon’s opulent Temple in a later time stands quite clearly in contrast to such ideal visions. But even that Temple, with its finished magnificence and rich trappings, still paid homage to the ancient concern about the intrusion of technology by insisting that if the stones were to be dressed, that had to be done out of sight and out of earshot of the place of worship itself: when the House was built, only finished stones cut at the quarry were used, so that no hammer or ax or any iron tool was heard in the House while it was being built (1 Kings 6:7).

Thus there is an old tradition of simplicity that opposes the grandiosity of the Mishkan, but what was the idea behind it? Consider a terse comment by Abraham ibn Ezra: there should be only complete stones, just as they were created (Short Commentary on Exodus 20:22). That phrase—“just as they were created”—is an essential gloss. It is as if attempting to worship God by means of something created by *our* wisdom is somehow to miss the entire point. The more ancient commentary on Exodus known as the Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai nicely captures what this is all about:

“Do not build it of hewn stones.” . . . from where are they to be brought? From virginal land: one digs until a place is reached in which it is clear that there has

been neither work nor building there, and the stones in that place are then removed.

In 2003, I met a fascinating archaeologist named Uzi Avner, who had studied desert culture extensively. One of the things he repeatedly encountered was that ancient worship sites in the wilderness almost always featured uncut, rough, natural *matzevot* (pillars) to represent the divine:

Crude stone, shaped by nature, or God, not by man, is sacred and appropriate for cult purposes. . . . [this opposition to human technology in worship] was shared by the prehistoric desert religions, by the Israelites, the Nabataeans, and Islam, all with desert roots. (“Sacred Stones in the Desert,” *Biblical Archeology Review*, 2001)

The view that the elaborate Mishkan was not the ideal had additional roots in rabbinic literature. Abraham Joshua Heschel noted Rabbi Yishmael’s disagreement with the view that the Mishkan was part of God’s plan from the start:

Rabbi Ishmael . . . understood that the command to build the Tabernacle . . . was not given until after the Israelites created the golden calf. What forced Rabbi Ishmael to postdate the building of the Tabernacle? It must be a reflection of the conviction that this command did not enter the divine mind until Israel sinned . . . when it was clear that they were prone to idolatry, the command was given to build a Tabernacle and to bring sacrificial animals to the officiating priests. (*Heavenly Torah*, 76)

In this view, the Mishkan, and *a fortiori* the more fixed and formalized Temple, is not about bringing us close but, on the contrary, is *institutionalized distance*. Keeping the people, who were prone to idolatrous attachment to their own artifices, safely away from the seat of worship, lest they mistake what *they* have erected and created for the essence of religion.

Remarkably, Leonard Cohen seemed to have intuited this very idea in his song “*Lover Come Back To Me*.” Here are the relevant stanzas:

*I asked my father, I said, “Father change my name.”
The one I’m using now it’s covered up
with fear and filth and cowardice and shame.*

*“Let me start again,” I cried, “please let me start again,
I want a face that’s fair this time,
I want a spirit that is calm.”*

*“I never never turned aside,” He said, “I never walked
away.*

*It was you who built the temple,
it was you who covered up My face.”*

Building Temples runs the risk of obscuring God’s face. We may of necessity build institutions that are essential to provide a locus for our religious needs. But we should never lose sight of the fact that they will always have the potential of distancing us, rather than drawing us close, if we cannot retain the simplicity that undergirds the life of the spirit.

This is not an argument against technology and human artifice per se. But when you think about it, religious reforms usually bring with them returns to greater simplicity. It is not only true of the Shakers, who sang of the “gift to be simple, the gift to be free.” We ourselves have a clear strain within our tradition of a preference for the simple as a precondition for true worship. Or at least we can say this: we have long recognized that an imbalance toward what human technology creates, even when yielding blessing—and *certainly* an idolization of what human ingenuity has produced—will ultimately distance us from God.

There may not only be *environmental* wisdom in greater simplicity. There may also be great *spiritual* depth, and opportunity for encountering God, in some human and humane simplicity as well.