

PARASHAT VAYAKHEL-PEKUDEI

The Mishkan - Ideal First Choice or After-the-Fact?

by Rav Menachem Leibtag

Preface by Rav Bick:

One of the major areas of disagreement concerning the effect of the sin of the Golden Calf concerns the mishkan. The instructions for building the mishkan precede the sin (parashat Teruma), whereas the actual construction follows (Vayakhel-Pekudei). Rashi and the Ramban disagree whether, text-location notwithstanding, the actual command to build the mishkan preceded or followed the sin. In his TSC shiur, Rav Menachem Leibtag advanced one solution to the question whether in fact Rashi actually believes that the idea of a physical sanctuary is no more than a response to the sin of the "eigel." This year, Rav Leibtag is presenting another solution to the same problem, which, among other things, demonstrates the principle of "shiv'im panim liTorah" (There are seventy faces - presentations - to the Torah). First, we shall review the background. [Rav Menachem Liebttag - <http://www.tanach.org/shmot/truma/trumas1.htm>]

The specific question being discussed is the TIME of the command to build the mishkan, Rashi delaying it until after the sin of the "eigel ha-zahav" in parashat Ki Tisa. The TIME of the command, however, suggests also the framework for the meaning of the command. Hence, it is natural according to the Ramban, who follows the order of the parashot which place the command, in Teruma, immediately after the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, to see the mishkan as a continuation of the resting of the Divine Presence on the earth. The mishkan provides a more permanent "domicile" for the presence of God which first rested temporarily on Sinai. On the contrary, according to Rashi who distorts the natural order of the parashot in order to delay the command to build the mishkan until after the sin, it is natural to assume that the mishkan is a means of atonement for the sin, or a response to the new situation created by the sin. Rav Leibtag 's question is whether according to Rashi there would have been no such thing as a physical sanctuary had the sin not occurred.

Let us first review some of the proofs for both positions.

A. Rashi - Rashi explicitly associates several features of the mishkan with the sin of the eigel. In the shiur Rav Leibtag mentions the donation of the half-shekel, the choice of Chur's grandson Betzalel, the role of the kohanim and the tribe of Levi, and the bull (= calf) brought by Aharon in the dedication ceremony. To this, various commentators have added the use of gold in the mishkan (see Tanchuma, Teruma 8, especially the need for the people to DONATE the gold), and especially the dedication ceremony in Tetzaveh and Tzav, which is replete with references to chatat and kappara.

The Seforno (24,18) is one commentator who undoubtedly adopted the extreme implications of Rashi's position (as opposed to that outlined in both this and last year's shiurim), and brought an interesting proof to it. The Seforno points out that at the end of Yitro, immediately after the revelation on Sinai, God says, "An altar of earth shall you make for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings (ola) and your peace offerings (shelamim), your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I record My name, I shall come to you and bless you" (21,21). The Seforno interprets this to mean that there is no need for kohanim, and apparently, that there is no need for a particular place. A simple earth altar is sufficient. Only after the sin (Teruma, delayed until after Ki Tisa) does God command "They shall make me a sanctuary and I shall dwell in their midst." The Seforno is clearly claiming that before the sin, there was no plan to establish a central sanctuary with formal rules of operation.

Some of the midrashim which are sometimes quoted in this context, on the other hand, are advancing no more than the idea that God rushed the building of the mishkan immediately after the sin (or, more exactly, immediately after Yom Kippur, when the sin was forgiven), in order to show that He had rescinded the decree and that the Jews would indeed be the recipients of the presence of God, AS BEFORE, despite the sin. This does not imply that the plan itself has changed; rather, on the contrary, that despite all, it has not.

B. The Ramban - Obviously, the main proof to the Ramban's position is the order of the parashot. The Ramban is undoubtedly influenced by a more general ideological consideration - he is convinced that mishkan and mikdash are central motifs of the Torah and the halakha.

Here too, various commentators have searched for parallels between the details of the mishkan and the narrative of Mt. Sinai. Rav Leibtag has pointed to the walls (mechitzot) around the mishkan and the boundaries around the mountain, the successive and nested realms where fewer and fewer people are allowed, the altar at the foot of the mountain, etc. In a comment to the Parasha discussion group several years ago, Rav Helfgot added the following point. The first time the root ShKhN is used is in ch. 24, at the end of Mishpatim - "Vayishkon kvod HaShem al Har Sinai." This episode definitely took place in connection with the revelation of Mt. Sinai - in

fact, according to many commentators, it took place BEFORE the revelation. Why then does the root of the word mishkan appear only here. It appears that the Torah is trying, by the placement and by the use of the root, to connect the revelation on Mt. Sinai, with the succeeding parasha of Teruma - "ve-asu li mikdash ve-shakhanti betokham." The mishkan is the continuation of Har Sinai.

Rav Helfgot's shiur on Tetzaveh (in 5757) on the differences between the Miluim in Tetzave and their fulfillment in parashat Tzav-Shemini was itself a proof to the position of the Ramban. By finding aspects of the mishkan in Sefer Vayikra which seem to be connected to the eigel, but WHICH ARE NOT FOUND IN THE ORIGINAL INSTRUCTIONS IN SEFER SHEMOT, we may conclude that the basic idea of the mishkan, and specifically parashot Teruma and Tetzaveh, precede the sin.

[See <http://vbm-torah.org/parsha/20tetzav.htm>]

And now, to the shiur.

In the parashot of Vayakhel and Pekudei, the nation of Israel is commanded to build the Mishkan, according to the instructions already conveyed to Moshe in the parashot of Teruma and Tetzaveh. In between these two sets of instructions we find the parasha of Ki Tisa, which includes the story of the golden calf. The commentators debate whether these parashot are recorded according to the order in which they occurred (- this position is maintained by the Ramban in his commentary to Shemot 25:1, as well as by the Ibn Ezra -), or whether the order is not chronological, and the episode of the golden calf actually preceded the command to build the Mishkan (as is maintained by Rashi in his commentary to Shemot 31:18 and by the Chizkuni). According to the opinion of the Ramban, it would seem that the concept of the Mishkan is a positive ideal, a sort of continuation of the Sinaitic experience, while the position of Rashi would seem to suggest that the need for a Mishkan was 'bedi-avad' - "after the fact" - i.e., not God's original intention, but rather a requirement which resulted from the sin of the golden calf.

In this article we shall attempt to prove that even according to Rashi, the idea of the Mishkan (and its successor - the Beit HaMikdash) is an objective ideal, and that the debate between the two opinions is limited to the reasons for certain details which are part of the command to build it.

Let us begin with a proof that the commandment to build a Mishkan represents an ideal. After all, how could it be that were it not for Israel's sinning with the golden calf, they would not have been commanded to build this most significant and central edifice?

At the end of parashat Mishpatim, in the mitzva concerning the pilgrim festivals, the Torah states: "You shall celebrate three pilgrim ffor Me during the year. The festival of matzot... and you shall not see My face while you are empty-handed. And the festival of the harvest... three times during the year all your males shall see the face of the Lord God; you shall not sacrifice the blood of My offerings with chametz... The first fruits of your land shall you bring to the house of the Lord your God. You shall not cook a kid in its mother's milk."

There is no doubt that these words were presented to the nation before the incident of the golden calf, and they clearly demonstrates that a "house of the Lord your God" - the Mikdash - was meant to exist. They are commanded to see "the face of the Lord God" (implying - at the place where He is to be found) three times during the year. Hence the general idea of a Mikdash certainly exists previous to the commandment to build it, before the sin.

According to the Ramban, assuming as he does that the parashot are in fact in chronological order, the explanation of the order of the parashot is quite simple. The parashot of Teruma and Tetzaveh, with their instructions regarding the Mishkan, define more precisely how to go about building the "house of the Lord your God" mentioned at the end of parashat Mishpatim.

However, if we look at it from Rashi's point of view, we seem to be faced with a difficulty. Why does the commandment to build the Mishkan appear before the story of the golden calf when it should have chronologically come afterward?

Let us try to understand Rashi's position and the basis of the debate between the commentators by analyzing the order and structure of the parashot at the end of Sefer Shemot:

Looking at the end of the Sefer, we may clearly delineate four units:

- a. The giving of the Torah and the parashot of Har Sinai (chapters 19-24).
- b. The command to build the Mishkan and its vessels, in descending order of value (chapters 25-31).
- c. The sin of the golden calf and the subsequent receiving of the second set of tablets (chapters 32-34).
- d. The building of the Mishkan (Vayakhel-Pekudei) (chapters 35-40).

The Ramban's explanation emphasizes the juxtaposition and connection between the command regarding the Mishkan (b) and God's revelation on Har Sinai (a), and hence the logic of the order of the parashot as they appear. "The essence of the Mishkan was to allow the Divine glory which had rested on Har Sinai to rest upon it [the Mishkan] in hidden form... and therefore God first commanded the building of the Mishkan, so that He would have a home among them, sanctified for Him... And in the Mishkan, always accompanying Israel, would be the Divine glory which had appeared to them at Har Sinai, and when Moshe used to approach God would speak to him as He did on Har Sinai..." (Ramban on Shemot 25:1).

The actual building of the Mishkan (d), the execution of the command, was postponed until they had been forgiven for the sin of the golden calf.

Rashi, on the other hand, emphasizes the connection between the commandment regarding the Mishkan (b) and the sin of the golden calf (c). Let us examine some other examples of this connection which Rashi observed between these two events:

1. The need for the half-shekel in order to conduct a census of the nation (found at the beginning of parashat Ki Tisa).

"'And you shall give it for the service of the Tent of Meeting' - We learn from here that he was commanded to count them at the beginning of the collection for the Mishkan, after the episode of the golden calf, because a plague had been upon them (and many had died)." (Rashi on Shemot 30:16)

2. Aharon's sacrifice at the end of the dedication ceremonies, in parashat Tetzaveh:

"'One bull' - to atone for the golden calf, which was a bull" (Rashi on Shemot 29:1).

3. The selection of Chur's grandson as the chief builder of the Mishkan:

"'Betzalel ben Uri ben Chur' - Betzalel's grandfather is mentioned... because he died as a result of the incident of the golden calf, and the labor of the Mishkan came to atone for that sin; that is why Chur is mentioned here". (Chizkuni ibid, 31:2)

4. The selection of Aharon and his sons (and the tribe of Levi as a whole) to serve in the Mishkan (in place of the first-born sons).

"At that time God set aside the tribe of Levi' - During the first year following your exodus from Egypt, when you sinned with the golden calf and the tribe of Levi did not sin - God set them aside." (Devarim 10:8) [see "The Kohanim, the Leviim and the Sin of the Golden Calf" by Rav Mordechai Sabato, Megadim no. 2]

Because of the sin of the golden calf (c), certain details in the commandment to build the Mishkan (b) were altered, and therefore Rashi explains that the parashot are not in their chronological order:

"There is no chronological order in the Torah. The sin of the golden calf preceded the command regarding the construction of the Mishkan by a long period: On 17 Tammuz the first tablets were shattered, on Yom Kippur God was appeased and forgave Israel, and the next day the collection for the Mishkan commenced [it would seem that according to Rashi there is a connection between the collection of the gold for the purposes of the Mishkan and the collection of gold for the purposes of building the golden calf] and it was erected on 1st Nissan..." (Rashi on Shemot 31:18).

Rashi's opinion does not see the sin of the golden calf as a reason for the commandment to build the Mishkan; it simply addresses itself to the influence of that incident on specific aspects of the commandment, such as who would be involved in the construction, who would serve in the Mishkan, which sacrifices were to be brought there, etc.

The question which remains to be answered, according to Rashi's opinion, is why the parashot were not written in their correct chronological order. Why did the Torah see fit to record the commandment regarding the Mishkan before recounting the incident of the golden calf?

In his statement, "there is no chronological order in the Torah" Rashi means that the order of the parashot in the Torah is determined by thematic connections and not necessarily by the sequence of events. In this light, the Ramban's commentary on the thematic connection between the Mishkan and the giving of the Torah is not contradictory; it takes on renewed force. The Torah purposefully records the commandment of the Mishkan first, despite the fact that it was transmitted to Moshe only after the sin of the golden calf, and it is juxtaposed to the parashot of Har Sinai in order to emphasize the thematic connection between them. With regard to the entire issue of the importance of the Mishkan as an ideal, as a continuation of Matan Torah, there is absolutely no need to conclude that Rashi and the Ramban do not concur.

According to Rashi's position, it seems that the idea of the Mishkan appears as early as parashat Mishpatim, long before the sin of the golden calf, but the precise details of "God's house" were not yet listed. We do not know what the original plan for the construction of the Mishkan would have been had Israel not sinned. (Perhaps the original plans were "shattered" along with the first tablets.) In the wake of the golden calf - and perhaps as part of the atonement process - the original plans regarding the commandment of the Mishkan was changed, and some of the details were adapted accordingly. Rashi's explanation is based not on a negation of the idea that the Mishkan was an ideal but rather on his principle (which he maintains throughout his commentary) that "there is no chronological order in the Torah." He sees the command to build the Mishkan as connected both to Har Sinai and to the sin of the golden calf.

The Ramban believes (once again, throughout his commentary on the Torah) that we should only rely on negation of the chronological order of the stories recounted in the Torah as a last resort [see Ramban on Shemot 18:1 regarding the dispute as to whether Yitro arrived before or after Matan Torah.] Since there is no conclusive proof in the parashot containing the commandment to build the Mishkan that would direct us to explain them as an "atonement" for the golden calf, the Ramban prefers to leave the pin the order in which they appear.

[This article originally appeared in Daf Keshet vol. 327, Parashat Pekudei, Adar II 5752. Translated by Kaeren Fish.]

To receive the parsha shiur every week, write to:
With the message:

Subscribe yhe-parsha

This shiur is provided courtesy of the [Virtual Beit Midrash](#), the premier source of online courses on Torah and Judaism - 14 different courses on all levels, for all backgrounds.

Make Jewish learning part of your week on a regular basis - enroll in the
[Virtual Beit Midrash](#)

Yeshivat Har Et
Alon Shvut, Israel, 90433
office@etzion.org.il
