

Vayakhel & Pekudei

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Vayakhel

On the face of it there seems no logical reason to repeat all the details of the Tabernacle. The first time Moses gets instructions to build the tent of assembly, the ark with its covers and cherubs, the altars, the table, the vessels, everything in detail of form, dimension, and materials to be used. The second time Moses repeats these instructions to Betzalel (the master craftsman after whom Israel's school of Arts and Crafts is named) and his assistant, Oholiav.

The usual explanation is that this shows the importance of accurate transmission and of Moses' refusal to alter neither a jot nor a tittle. We might have expected a minor suggestion here or a modification there, or even the chance for the craftsmen to exercise a little free expression. But no, the dimensions and the details remain the same. Perhaps there was something more to the measurements than we realize. We know that we have forgotten many of the calculations that went into Stonehenge and the amazing structures of the Egyptians, the Aztecs, and the stone patterns of the Andes. There is a mystic dimension to the Tabernacle.

Given the fact that very few people had access to the written word on those days, the importance of repetition was that it made it easier to learn, to remember, and to retain knowledge. The importance of the dimensions of the Tabernacle, and then the Temple, is reiterated in Ezekiel's famous message to the Jews exiled in Babylon, when he again reminds them of every detail of the dimensions of the Temple as if to say, "You will be rebuilding soon, so make sure you've got the plans right and ready."

The message for us is that there is a whole body of material to which we are oblivious. If we really value our heritage, we owe it to ourselves to look into it a little deeper.

Pekudei

The Tabernacle was erected and dedicated in the second year of the journey through the wilderness on the assumption that shortly the Children of Israel would be invading and settling in the Land of Canaan. Its function as a community center was reiterated by the way it was used as a sort of university or yeshiva for teaching and disseminating the law, both civil and ritual. Moses would teach what he had already received, and what he continued to receive, from God to the priests and the elders, who then taught and directed the rest of the people.

But there was a clear understanding that all of the structures were temporary and in due course other structures, permanent ones, would replace them in the Land of Israel. This transience was emphasized by the pillar of fire and the

pillar of cloud that centered on the Tabernacle. They were signs of God's involvement and the signal for moving or settling. Fire and cloud—the one powerful in its capacity both to destroy and to nurture, the other the source of rain and life, yet at the same time vague, insubstantial, and ephemeral.

Just as their lives wandering in Sinai had elements of permanence and of transience, so too their spiritual life combined the two. Some laws were temporary, related only to a one-off invasion or to changing conditions like leprosy or slavery, and changing times like replacing the Tabernacle with the Temple. Others were permanent and eternal.

The manna, the cloud, and the fire were there initially till the invasion, which was expected to be a year away. In the event, they lasted for forty years. All of these elements exist within our own daily lives—the permanent, the temporary, and the unexpected. Torah gives a framework for coping with them.