



***Parashat Vayakhel and Parashat Pekudei  
Building God's Beautiful Bayit; or, Queer Eye for the Desert Mishkan***

by Marisa James on Saturday March 17, 2007

27 Adar 5767

Exodus 35:1 - 40:38, Shabbat

When I first read this week's joint parshiyot, with their detailed lists of the sockets, pegs and posts that go into building the Mishkan, I could only imagine that the children of Israel had somehow ended up at the Sinai IKEA. I pictured Moses, in a burst of confidence after getting everyone across the sea, picking up the "A\_rk oöf Tabêrnäkkle" kit and making everyone sit down to decipher wordless instructions on how to build the thing.

But really, there's something lovely about the time and care that goes into all of these descriptions. Vayakhel and Pekudei continue our languorous journey through the design and creation of the tabernacle. During their 430 years in Egypt, laboring as slaves, building stark, massive pyramids for a succession of pharaohs, the children of Israel have been deprived of beauty. As we've seen, they have lacked imagination until now; they bitterly complain to Moses at every turn, until he produces yet another miracle, which they promptly forget again when they are hungry, or frightened, or want something tangible to worship.

But in the building of the Mishkan, the children of Israel become artists. Yes, there are specific instructions for how to build it, but each member of the community, we are told, gives what they can: their goods, their effort, and their talent. And we are privileged to read about the results in loving, careful, artistic detail. Beauty is a necessity, both for Moses and the Israelites then, and for us now.

Moses says, "If a person feels like giving an offering to God, bring any of the following: gold, silver, copper, sky-blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, and goats' hair, reddened ram's skins, blue processed hides, acacia wood, oil for the lamp, fragrances for the anointing oil and perfume incense, as well as sardonyxes and other precious stones for the ephod and the breastplate." (Exodus 35:5-9)

*If they feel like giving an offering to God, says Moses. This is not like last week's building of the golden calf, when Aaron, in his frustration with the Israelites, says, "Take the rings off the ears of your wives and children, [. . .] Bring them to me." (Exodus 32:2) The creative impulse cannot be demanded. In the creation of the Mishkan there can be no room for those who might give*



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reluctantly, or unwillingly, or all exactly the same. Every individual piece of silver and copper and wood and cloth must be given freely and with love in order to create the place where God can reside.

And the Mishkan is not being created from gold alone; Moses lists so many options for what each person could contribute that we're left in amazement about where all the materials come from. Each of the Israelites apparently has unexpected and diverse resources that we haven't seen until now. They bring items of every color and texture, metals and stones and fibers, along with talents which until now have remained hidden.

Why is it so important that we read several chapters of this description? A few *p'sukim*, two or three verses, could have told us that God asked Moses to make a beautiful dwelling-place, the Mishkan, of gold and silver, with the priests in robes embroidered with "pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, twisted." (39:24) A few *p'sukim* could have told us that the Israelites gave freely of their possessions and skills, and that the Mishkan was completed to God's specifications.

After centuries of famine and slavery, backbreaking work followed by a perilous escape, the Israelites need time to dwell on beauty, and so do we. It's easy to fall into the victimization of Israel in *mitzrayim* (Egypt/ the narrow place) and the alternating tedium and terror of wandering in the desert and have no hope for the future. Taking time to see the world around us in every inch of its detail is one way to restore our souls.

Similarly, in our own lives, it can be difficult to avoid feeling constantly victimized and oppressed, especially as members of the Jewish community, the queer community, and other minority communities. Our multiple marginalized identities frequently overlap to make us prime targets for the "hate-mongers" in our world. And in our work towards social justice and equal treatment, it can be hard to raise our heads from the struggle and appreciate the sheer beauty of the communities we have created. Just as the Israelites found beauty in the creation of the Mishkan, it's also necessary for us to move beyond our painful interactions with the world and take delight in the places where we are accepted and loved for all of our different aspects.

How do we do this in our daily lives? I live in New York City, where I'm constantly so inundated by my surroundings that it's easy to block it all out. But sometimes, I need to stop and listen to a street performer with a beautiful voice. Watch my friends' sleeping newborn children and imagine their dreams. Delight in the amazing diversity of the communities that have welcomed me, and in the beautiful visions we share of the world we're trying to create. It isn't enough to simply notice the beauty of the world—it's necessary that we each bring our diverse talents and gifts to continue the work of making our world into a Mishkan where God can reside.



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