

## Parashat Vayakheil - P'kudei

Hazzan Neil Schwartz --- March 16, 2012

In the last four Torah Portions of Exodus, we read about the architecture of the Tabernacle, the portable sanctuary which, according to our Torah, was built by the Israelites during their 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness of Sinai after their Exodus from Egypt.

Since I came to Saskatoon, I have been saying that the real lessons of the Tabernacle are the values that are represented by this structure and how it was built and used. This week I am going to postulate that the very pieces of the ancient Tabernacle can be thought of as metaphors for some important aspects of our Jewish Community life.

The goal was to put up a Tent that represented God's Presence among the Israelite tribes. Since it was in the middle of the Israelite camp, it had to be tall enough to be seen over the surrounding tents, and large enough for the priests to work inside it. It also had to be made of individual components that could be transported through the desert by the Levites.

How was it held up? By long thick boards, set vertically on end next to each other to form walls. How were those boards or planks supported? By heavy metal sockets sitting on the ground, with tongue-like tenons at the foot of each board to set into holes in these sockets.

What kept these boards lined up and connected to form solid walls? Square metal rings at the top of each pair of boards, rings connecting slots on top of each board to its neighboring boards on each side. Long bars were connected through metal rings on the outsides of the walls and through the middle of each set of boards, helping keep the vertical planks steady.

The Tabernacle had a beautiful linen curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the small building, and another beautiful curtain at its entrance. On top of the walls were three layers of roofing: an inner fine linen ceiling woven in blue, red and purple; a goat-hair wool outer ceiling like the Bedouin tents to protect the fragile inner linen ceiling; and sheets of goat leather on top protecting the thick wool tent from the abrasive desert winds.

The two layers of cloth roofing materials were so large, they had to be woven in separate sections so that they could be transported in wagons. These sections were joined together by round metal clasps at one edge inserted into loops at the edge of the next section.

Surrounding the entire small building with its cloth covers was a large courtyard, the size of our synagogue, but what could be used for portable walls to demarcate such a large area? What material would accommodate strong winds? The solution was strong mesh netting with openings for the desert winds, held up by tall pillars set in metal sockets every 20 feet apart.

When the time came periodically to disassemble this portable Tabernacle and move the Israelites to another oasis in the Sinai Wilderness, each family of Levites had responsibility for transporting certain pieces of the structure. Wagons were supplied for the heavy boards, courtyard posts, metal sockets, sections of the cloth ceilings and mesh courtyard walls. The incense and sacrifice alters, seven-branch Menorah, gold table for the loaves of bread, and Ark of the Covenant were each carried by long poles on the shoulders of a Levitical family.

So, what metaphors and lessons can be drawn from this ingenious construction plan? How can this ancient architecture speak to us 3,000 years after the Tabernacle was constructed in the Sinai Wilderness and carried around for 40 years, according to the Book of Exodus?

The individual vertical boards that made up the Tabernacle walls can represent the strength of Jewish identity that is part our life for each of us. The heavy metal sockets at the foot of each board represent our firm grounding in Jewish values, ethics and ideals. However, each of us alone can waver like unconnected vertical planks if we stand alone in our Judaism.

The solution is to be a community, to metaphorically “put our arms around each other’s shoulders” and support each other, one person on each side, just as the metal rings at the top of the planks bound them together. The long rods which further strengthened the walls of the Tabernacle represent the centuries of Jewish history and heritage that we all inherit from those who came before us.

The curtains inside the Tabernacle and its inner ceiling were beautiful woven linen cloths, with red, blue and purple threads and intricate designs. These represent the beauty inherent in living a Jewish life according to the cycle of Jewish holidays and our life-cycle moments.

The goat-wool heavy outer roof which protected the fine linen inner ceiling represents the protection from assimilation which comes from living a life that affirms Jewish identity. The clasps which held together individual sections of heavy tent-cloth can show how vital it is to clasp hands with one another in friendship and cooperation as we build our community.

The large courtyard that surrounded the Tabernacle and the large outer alter where animal sacrifices took place represents our interacting with the rest of the world around us. Just as the courtyard was surrounded by mesh walls to let the desert wind pass through, we must maintain our Jewish identity as we interface with the challenges which life brings to us.

Just as each family of Levites had the responsibility to transport certain components of the portable Tabernacle, so too each of us brings our unique skills and energies to help sustain our Jewish community. Some are officers and Board members, some are teachers, some are cooks and bakers, and some participate in our worship services. Everyone has a role to play if our Jewish community is to flourish and move forward into a vibrant future.

My hope for us all is that we can use the lessons of these four Torah Portions to help us build our own Jewish identities, and to encourage us to work hard at the vital work of strengthening our Jewish community. Just as the individual components of the ancient portable Tabernacle were joined together to build a strong and beautiful Sanctuary in the Sinai Wilderness, we too must join together to build a strong and active community within the larger world around us.

Shabbat Shalom