



THE EGYPTIANS INSTIGATED THE SIN OF THE GOLDEN CALF. SFORNO SAYS THE TEMPLE WAS A RESPONSE TO THAT SIN, SOMEHOW ADDRESSING THE CORRUPTION. WHAT WAS SFORNO'S UNDERSTANDING?

Addressed in this week's article

The Jews succumbed to idol worship many times. We must be on guard not to do the same.

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Parshas Vayakel

RABBI BERNARD FOX

"And Moshe gave orders to make an announcement in the camp, "Let no man or woman bring any more material for the sacred offering." (Shemot 36:6)

The nation responds to the request for donations of materials for the construction of the Mishcan. These donations are sufficient for creating the Mishcan and all of its components. The craftsmen charged with the fashioning of the Mishcan report to Moshe that they have received sufficient material. Upon

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THE TEMPLE: A RESPONSE to the GOLDEN CALF

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

In Exodus, 25:8, God instructs man, "Make Me a Temple and I will dwell among you."

Sforno comments on the purpose of the Temple in 25:9 as follows: "In order that I may dwell in your midst, to speak to you and to accept your prayers and the (Temple) service of Israel, not as the matter was prior to the Golden Calf, as was stated, (Exod. 20:21) "In every place that you mention My name, I will come to you and bless you." Sforno says that prior to the sin of the Golden Calf, the statement in Yisro, "In every place that you mention My name..." teaches that God's relationship to man was that anyone, anywhere, would have his prayers recognized by God. But subsequent to the Golden Calf, a new system was demanded, "In order that I may dwell in your midst, to speak to you and to accept your prayers and the (Temple) service of Israel,..."

Sforno teaches a startling concept; the Temple may not have had an objective need, but was a concession in response to the Golden Calf. If the Jews hadn't sinned with that Calf, perhaps the



Ramban said that even a fool would not think the gold in his ear is what took him out of Egypt. What the sinners believed was that the Golden Calf was some force which could have an effect on nature - not that it was God.

structure of Temple, the ark, the menorah and all the vessels would not be commanded, according to Sforno. "Make Me a Temple and I will dwell among you" teaches that after the Calf, without the Temple, God will not dwell with us. One might suggest this is an impossible theory, as the Temple appears in the Torah before the sin of the Calf. But Rashi addresses this in Exodus 31:18, "There is no chronology in the Torah; the Golden Calf preceded the command of the work of the Temple by many days..." Rashi again makes mention (Deut. 10:1) that it was only on Moses' descent from Mount Sinai did God first command him on the work of the Tabernacle. It was at the time of his

descent that the Jews had already sinned with the Golden Calf.

What was the precise sin of the Golden Calf, and how does the institution of the Tabernacle and Temple rectify the problem? Sforno also teaches that prior to the Calf, one's prayer was readily noticed by God, afterwards it was not. This needs an explanation.

A few other relationships are seen between the sin of the Calf and the Temple/Tabernacle which supports Sforno's explanation. Those who sinned with the Calf were not allowed to serve in the Temple. For this reason, the entire tribe of the Levites who abstained from the sin of the calf merited Temple service.

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RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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One might suggest a simple explanation; idolaters are prohibited to officiate in God's service. But perhaps there is more to this command. Additionally, no gold was used in the service of the Holy of Holies, due to the reason that "the accused cannot be come the defender". That is, the accused - the gold (representative of the Golden Calf) cannot be part of man's service seeking atonement. One does not mention his gravest sins when seeking pardon for his offenses. Similarly, the Torah teaches that the High Priest's garb including gold must not be worn when entering the Holy of Holies. Prior to entering, he must change into his white garments. Again we see a tie between Temple law and the sin of the Golden Calf.

The Torah teaches that the Jews gave their jewelry for the creation of the Calf, (Exod., 32:3) "And they removed, all the people, the rings of gold, that were in their ears, and they brought it to Aaron." We also learn that the Tabernacle was created from the peoples' donation of Terumah, "...from every man whose heart motivates him you shall take my Terumah". Is there any parallel between these two acts of giving, that the Torah wished to record both?

Another verse in response to the sin of the Calf reads "And Moses took the tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the 'Tent of Meeting', and it would be that anyone seeking God would, go out to the Tent of Meeting that was outside the

camp." (Exodus 33:7) This verse teaches that prior to the sin, God communicated with Moses within the camp. But after the sin, this close relationship could no longer be. Moses therefore demonstrated this by his removal of his tent to outside the camp of the nation. What may we learn from this act of moving the tent? Isn't it clearly stated that whoever sought God would exit the camp? So God was still found. What purpose is there in distancing the Tent of Meeting from the people?

To clarify, Sforno is not suggesting that without the sin of the Golden Calf, there would be no institution of sacrifice. Sacrifice dates back to the first men. Adam's children brought sacrifices. Noah, Abraham and so many other figures sacrificed long before the Golden Calf. To clarify, Sforno is suggesting that the institution of Temple alone is due to the sin of the Calf, but he agrees that sacrifice always existed. So our main question is how the Temple addresses the problem of the Golden Calf sin.

How do we begin to answer this main question? The first step would be to understand the sin. We should look for an expression of the sin exhibited by the sinners. This would make for accurate analysis. God's own words describing the Jews' precise flaw would provide an even better clue. Fortunately in this case, we have both.(1) The mixed multitude said about the Calf, (Exod. 32:4) "These are your gods Israel, who took you up from Egypt." Later, after the giving of the tablets to Moses, God says to him concerning the Jews' worship of the Calf, (Exod. 32:8)"They have turned quickly from the path which I have commanded them, they made for themselves a molten calf, and they prostrated to it and sacrificed to it and they said, 'These are your gods Israel, who took you up from Egypt.'" God purposefully repeated this statement in His Torah, "These are your gods Israel, who took you up from Egypt." I believe this is to point us to the Jews' precise error.

God is teaching us that the Jews'

sin was due to their wish to relate to God in some tangible form. Ramban and Or Hachaim dismiss the notion that the Jews thought the Calf to be God. Ramban said, "no fool would say the gold that was in their ears is what brought them up out of Egypt." (Exod. 32:4) Ramban explains that the Jews did not say the Calf was God, but that this Calf was some force of God.(2) Or Hachaim says on "they turned aside", that they violated "you shall not make intermediaries." Both Ramban and Or Hachaim agree that the Jews admitted to God's existence, and that this Calf was not viewed by the Jews as God. The Jews' error was their belief that the Golden Calf had forces which effect reality.

Consider the Jews words when they felt Moses was no longer returning, "...Moses the man who took us up from Egypt, we know not what has happened to him." Why did they mention Moses "the man"? This statement too points to the Jews' inability to relate to God as he is, above the physical, "metaphysical". They became attached to the "man" of Moses. When they miscalculated Moses' stay on Mt. Sinai, they were confronted with a false belief that Moses was gone. They feared not having some tangible leader, so they created the Golden Calf and said this was responsible some how for their exodus. They desired something physical to relate to. This is not tolerated in Judaism, and many have been killed (Samuel I, 6:19(3))because of their projection of physical qualities onto God. Judaism demands above all else that we do not project any physical nature onto God, (Deut. 4:15) "And guard yourselves exceedingly for your lives, for you did not see any form on the day God spoke to you on Horeb (Sinai) from amidst flames." The Torah stresses how fundamental it is to know that God cannot be physical, and that we saw no physical objects when we heard God speak to us on Sinai.

Maimonides third principle of his 13 Principles reads:

"Principle III. The Denial of Corporeality in Connection with God. This is to accept that this

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Oneness that we have mentioned above (Principle 2) is not a body and has no strength in the body, and has no shape or image or relationship to a body or parts thereof. This is why the Sages of blessed memory said with regards to heaven there is no sitting, nor standing, no awakensness, nor tiredness. This is all to say that He does not partake of any physical actions or qualities. And if He were to be a body then He would be like any other body and would not be God. And all that is written in the holy books regarding descriptions of God, they are all anthropomorphic. Thus said our great Rabbis of blessed memory The Torah spoke in man's language (i.e. using human terms so that man would have some understanding). And the Rabbis have already spoken at length on this issue. This is the third pillar and is attested to by the verse "For you saw no image" meaning that you did not see an image or any form when you stood at Sinai because as we have just said He has no body nor power of the body."

Perhaps now we may answer how the Temple addresses the sin of the Golden Calf. The Temple had many unique qualities and vessels. But most central was the fact that it was constructed of two rooms; a Holies, and a Holy of Holies. In this second room, no man was allowed to enter, save the high priest on Yom Kippur, and even then, only with smoking incense, a veil. Sinai too was accompanied by smoke and darkness. God created His "appearance" as cloud. In all cases, we are taught that there is an impenetrable veil - cloud - between God and man. "For man cannot know me when alive." (Exod. 33:20) Man must accept his mind's shortcomings, his inability to know

God. We have but five senses of perception. All that cannot be perceived through these senses is completely out of our range of knowledge. In a dark room, vision does not function, as vision requires light. God is not physical, similarly, He cannot be perceived by human sensation which requires physical stimulation.

The sin of the Golden Calf was man's futile attempt to grasp what man cannot grasp. When man assumes there is a sensory connection between God and the physical, man forfeits his purpose. His existence is worthless, as all he knows or learned in his life, to him, stems from an imagined physical god, not the true metaphysical God. His knowledge is completely inaccurate. His life is wasted due to his incorrect notions of God. He deserves death. Therefore, those who worshiped the Calf were killed, just as those who looked into the Ark when it was returned by the Philistines. (Samuel I, 6:19) In both cases, man assumed something physical in connection with God. In truth, the underlying flaw is man's overestimation in his own knowledge. In both cases the sinners felt all must be under their grasp, including God. They could not accept human inability.

We mentioned that the Temple has two rooms, one of which is off limits. The Temple attempts to teach man through man's distance from a certain room, that man must admit complete ignorance about the nature of God's existence. Even more, man must not even try to approach any understanding of God's existence - it is impossible for our minds to apprehend, and is "off limits". We cannot know Him. A location, the Holy of Holies, coupled with the command never to

enter, opposes man's assumption that God is approachable, and teaches that in fact, we cannot fathom God's existence. What we do know concerning God, is as Maimonides explains, is what he is not. We can only have negative knowledge of God. That is, we know He is not physical, He has no emotions, He occupies no place, He is not "in" this world, etc.

Prior to the sin, the people had not demonstrated a false notion of God. Therefore, as Sforno states, in any place they called to God, He responded. This is because they were calling on the true God. However, subsequent to their sin, they corrupted their view of God, and he therefore could not answer. They did not call to "Him", but to an imagined idea of God. An imagination cannot answer someone's call. Moses' removal of his Tent of Meeting was a demonstration that there was a separation between God and the people after the Calf.

Perhaps we can also answer why the Temple was constructed from free donations. Such an act demonstrates that the donor is not attached to the precious metals, gems, and materials, but he gives freely. In fact, his focus on physical property is replaced by an act of following a Divine command, to build a Temple to God. Such a donation enables man to remove his grip on the physical, which the sinners could not accomplish. Man is also perfected by this display of following God's commands, not man's own fantasies. ◻

Footnotes:

- (1) But even the Jews' sin is recorded by God's divine words, so in fact, both are God's clues for our study.
- (2) Either notion is a corruption in our view of God, and is prohibited.
- (3) The Jews looked into the ark upon its return from the Philistines. This demonstrated their belief that there is something to be seen in relationship to God. They harbored a notion that God is connected with the physical. A large amount of Jews were punished there with death by God's hand.

Moses' Melting of the Golden Calf

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Reader: If Moses melted the calf, then how did he grind it into fine powder? I wouldn't know where to begin with the Talmud.

Mesora: The physics is not a problem, after Moses melted the calf, it cooled and hardened, now ready to be ground. The question is why Moses did both, melting and grinding. Perhaps this teaches that had Moses simply ground the calf, people would feel they were drinking something of the calf per se, an idolatrous rite. Moses did not want to mislead the people further, so he first removed the form of the calf from the gold through melting it. Now, in the gold's unformed state, Moses ground the gold and made the Jews drink of the gold dust, mixed in water which emanated from the Mountain.

Moses would not institute any practice relating to the worshiped form of "calf". Melting was prior to the grinding to rid the gold of the form of the calf.

Additionally, Moses' act gives us an insight into Jewish Law - "Halacha." One might argue that the gold - be it melted or in the original form of the calf - is still the "substance" that was worshiped and should therefore retain the status of an idol. While the substance is the same, however, the object is not. Halacha is not governed by rules of physics - just the opposite is true. Halacha tells us what the object is. When one steals, if a change occurs in the object, the law to return the stolen object can no longer be fulfilled, as the 'stolen object' no longer exists. Halacha views a substantial change in form as a totally new object. Payment must be made in place of the object's return. Here too, Moses melted the Calf so the Jews would not relate to it, but to mere gold. Halacha defines our reality. This teaches us that our lives are to be governed by intelligence and wisdom, not by an overestimation of the physical. ◻

Parshas Vayakel

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receiving this news Moshe announces that no more donations should be brought.

The commentaries remark that an exact tally was kept of the donations. The purpose of this accounting was twofold. First, it was essential to secure sufficient materials. Second, Moshe did not wish to collect more than was needed. The importance of collecting sufficient materials is obvious. However, the Chumash emphasizes that Moshe was equally concerned with not collecting excess materials. Once the needed materials were donated, Moshe immediately directed Bnai Yisrael to stop bringing donations. Why was this issue so crucial? Why was Moshe so deeply concerned with not accepting excess donations?

The commentaries offer various explanations. We will consider one of these responses. Gershonides explains that Moshe's concern was based on a principle found in the Talmud. The Talmud in Tractate Ketubot explains that a person should not donate more than one fifth of one's assets to charity. Maimonides extends this principle to the performance of all mitzvot. A person should not spend more than one fifth of his wealth on the performance of any mitzvah. For example, in purchasing an animal for sacrifice, this limit applies. Maimonides offers an explanation for this restriction. A person should avoid being dependant on others for support. Therefore, one should not risk impoverishing himself. Gershonides explains that Moshe's concern was based on this principle. He did not want the people to bring more than was needed. He did not want anyone to become impoverished because of zeal to contribute to the Mishcan. Gershonides offers an important insight into the restriction against spending an excess of one fifth of

one's wealth in the performance of a mitzvah. He agrees with Maimonides' explanation of the restriction. One should not risk poverty and lose of independence. However, Gershonides asserts that there is a more fundamental explanation for the restriction. He explains that the Torah prohibits the performance of a mitzvah in a manner that leads to evil. Becoming impoverished through contributing to charity or performing a mitzvah is a negative or evil outcome. Gershonides further explains that such an evil outcome discourages others from performing the mitzvah.

"And the materials were sufficient for all of the work that was to be done and there was extra." (Shemot 36:7)

The Mishcan was constructed from materials donated by the people. The exuberance of the nation was so great that the contributions exceeded the needs. Moshe notified the people that more than enough materials had been received. There was no need for additional donations. The pasuk indicates that Moshe did not suspend donations until the specifications had been exceeded. It might be assumed that this was unintentional. Moshe needed to be sure that adequate supplies were available. In order to be certain, he allowed collections to continue until he felt the actual requirements were exceeded. He wanted to allow for a margin of error. Sforno comments that this was not the case. Moshe intentionally allowed extra supplies to be collected. Why did Moshe collect more than was necessary? Sforno responds that he did not want the craftsmen constructing the Mishcan to be frugal in the use of the materials. Frugality might diminish the quality of the final product. Sforno is teaching a practical lesson. Parsimony is likely to result in a less than optimal product. To create something special, we must be ready to pay the price. However there is possibly another concept implicit in Sforno's comments.

Sforno explains that the

sacredness of the Mishcan was enhanced by the unique attention given to its construction. The craftsmen were totally committed to the fulfillment of the will of Hashem. Therefore every component of the Mishcan was a perfect reflection of the will of the Almighty. This concept suggests an additional meaning to Moshe's determination to prevent frugality. The command to construct the Mishcan required strict adherence to the specifications. The craftsmen were permitted to consider no other factor. If the craftsman gave any thought to the supply of materials, then an inappropriate consideration had entered into the design. Therefore the legal requirements of the command required that the materials exceed the actual needs.

"And they made the upright beams of the Mishcan out of acacia wood." (Shemot 36:20)

Parshat VaYakhel includes a discussion of the fabrication of the components of the Mishcan. This process began with the fabrication of the tent and its coverings. This was followed by the fashioning of the upright boards or beams that supported the tent. This same order was followed in the instructions provided to Moshe for the creation of the Mishcan. The instructions for the tent and its coverings preceded the instructions for these beams. Gershonides discusses this order. He explains that the function of the boards was to support the tent. Therefore, it was appropriate to construct the tent and then the supporting boards. It is difficult to understand Gershonides' comments. First, Gershonides bases his explanation for the order of manufacture on the relationship between the boards and the tent. Based on the same relationship, an argument can be made for first constructing the boards. The tent cannot be erected until after the boards are fashioned. This suggests that the boards should be fashioned first and then the curtains and the coverings for the tent! Second, Gershonides' position would be more comprehensible were the Mishcan assembled piecemeal.

Under such circumstances, the argument could be made that the components should be fashioned in the order they were needed. However, the Mishcan was not erected piecemeal. It was assembled only after all of the components were fashioned. At the time of assembly, all of the components were present and put in place. The boards and the tent were needed virtually simultaneously!

In order to explain Gershonides' comments, we must identify an important concept regarding the Mishcan. The Mishcan was composed of various components. Examples of these components are the tent, the boards, the Menorah, and the Ark. However, these components were not of the same nature. Some components were complete in themselves. Others were merely prerequisites for other components. This distinction is evident through comparing the tent and the boards. The tent was a complete component in itself. In this sense it was similar to the Ark and the Menorah. However, the boards were only a requisite for the function of the tent. The boards supported the tent. We can now understand Gershonides' comments. The tent was innately a complete component. It did not require the boards in order to be complete. Therefore, the tent could be fashioned before, and independent of, the boards. In contrast, the boards were merely a prerequisite for the curtains of the tent. Therefore, they had no function or significance prior to the existence of the tent. It follows that the boards could be formed only after the tent was manufactured. □

Footnotes:

Mesechet Ketubot 50a. Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Erchin VeCharamin 8:13. Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), p 444. Sefer Shemot 26:1-30. Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), pp. 444-445.

Parshas Pekudey

RABBI BERNARD FOX

"And he made a copper washbasin and its copper base from the mirrors of the women that came to pray at opening of the Mishcan." (Shemot 38:8)

Sforno explains that these mirrors were not among the original donations to the Mishcan. He also comments that it is not at all obvious that the mirrors should have been accepted. Mirrors are designed for use in indulging fascination with personal appearance. Therefore, they are identified with the instinctual component of the personality. It might be concluded that this identification would disqualify the mirrors from use in the Mishcan. Why were the mirrors accepted? Sforno explains that these women had devoted themselves to the study of Torah. They congregated at the Mishcan to hear the Torah lessons taught there. Their decision to contribute their mirror reflected their personal values. They had determined that the instinctual habits represented by the mirrors were not worthy of their attention. Therefore, they abandoned the mirrors. These mirrors did not represent the instinctual. They represented the conquest of these individuals over the yetzer harah.

Rashi provides a different perspective on this donation. He comments that Moshe was reluctant to accept this contribution. Hashem instructed Moshe to reverse his decision. Moshe was concerned with the mirrors' association with the yetzer harah. Why did Hashem want this donation? Rashi explains that one of the reasons the Egyptians afflicted Bnai Yisrael with intense physical labor was to slow down the population growth. Paroh wanted to work the men to the point of exhaustion. He reasoned that this would undermine relations between man and wife. The women defeated Paroh's plan. They would travel out to the men. They would bring food. And they brought their mirrors. Man and wife would share a meal. Then the wife would hold her mirror in front of herself and her husband. Jokingly the wife would brag of her greater beauty. A relaxed banter would develop. The rigor of the work would be temporarily forgotten. Marital life was maintained.

The washbasin in the Mishcan was designed entirely from these mirrors. What is the lesson that the Torah wishes to teach through this utensil? Perhaps, the washbasin is designed to represent an important aspect of the Torah's perspective on the yetzer harah – the human instincts. The instinctual component of the personality is responsible for sin. Greed, lust, hatred and every other lowly personality trait are derived from the instincts. For this reason, our Sages refer to this component of the personality as the yetzer harah. However, the Torah does not maintain that the instincts are inherently evil.

Rav Eliyahu of Vilna – the Vilna Gaon – explains that the yetzer harah is responsible for many essential human functions. Procreation would not be possible without the drive of the yetzer harah. He argues that we would not

even eat were we not instinctually motivated. These are a few examples of the many important functions of human instinct. Only if the pursuit of instinctual pleasure is an end within itself, do these drives become evil. So, although sin is derived from the yetzer harah, the instincts are not innately sinful. The mirrors reflect this concept. Although the mirrors are tools of the instincts, they are not evil or unfit for use in the Mishcan. The suitability of the mirrors depends upon the manner in which they are used. If used towards a proper end, the instincts and the mirrors belong in the sacred Mishcan. Only when misused are the mirrors and instincts tainted.



"And you should place there the Ark of Testimony. And you should shield the Aron with the curtain." (Shemot 40:3)

Our pasuk discusses this Parochet. This was a curtain suspended in the Mishcan, in front of the Aron. According to our pasuk, the function of the Parochet was to shield the Aron. The Mishcan was composed of two areas. These two areas were the Kodesh – the Holy – and the Kodesh HaKadashim – the Holy of the Holy. The Aron was placed in the Kodesh HaKadashim. A curtain – the Parochet – separated these two areas. The Chumash, in Parshat Terumah, indicates that the purpose of the Parochet was to separate between these two areas. It seems that the Chumash is offering two different characterizations of the function of the Parochet. Our parasha indicates that the function of the Parochet was to shield the Aron. In Parshat Terumah, the Chumash indicates that the function of the Parochet was to separate the Kodesh from the Kodesh HaKadashim. How can we reconcile the two conflicting characterizations?

In reality these two sources are not contradictory. The Parochet was essentially a shield in front of the Aron. The Chumash, in Parshat Terumah, does not deny this definition. The Chumash is merely requiring that this shield be extended beyond the dimensions of the Aron, in order to create two areas within the Mishcan. In other words, the shielding function defines the Parochet. Once the Parochet meets this qualification, it can be extended to create a separation between the Kodesh and the Kodesh HaKadashim.

There are various laws that support this understanding of the Parochet. The Talmud, in Tractate Yoma, comments that the staves of the Aron actually protruded into the Parochet. One who observed the Parochet from the Kodesh would see two projections pushing out the curtain. This strange requirement can be understood based upon our understanding of the Parochet. The essential function of the Parochet was to shield the Aron. In order to demonstrate this function, the staves protruded into the Parochet. This also explains another interesting halacha. The Parochet played a role in the service associated with certain sacrifices. A portion of the blood of these sacrifices was sprinkled, by the Kohen, toward the

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Parochet. This law is expressly stated in the Chumash. The Midrash Torat Kohanim, comments that the blood could not be sprinkled toward any portion of the Parochet. The sprinkling must be directed specifically towards the portion of the Parochet that was between the staves of the Aron. Why was this portion of the Parochet special? Based on our discussion, this halacha can be appreciated.

The Parochet was, in essence, a shield for the Aron. Therefore, the essential portion of the Parochet was the portion directly in front of the staves. The blood was to be sprinkled on this portion of the Parochet. This role of the Parochet is evident in today's synagogues. It is customary to hang a curtain in front of the Aron. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik Ztl explained that this practice is based upon the halacha in our pasuk. We are duplicating the practice in the Mishcan. Our Ark represents the Aron of the Mishcan. Therefore, our Ark requires a curtain. It is not surprising that we call this curtain a Parochet.

"And place the sacrificial altar before the opening of the Mishcan – the Ohel Moed. And place the laver between the Ohel Moed and the altar and fill it with water." (Shemot 40:6-7)

Parshat Pekuday includes a detailed discussion of the actual assembly of the Mishcan. A careful analysis of the details of this account reveals many interesting aspects of the Mishcan. In particular, the relationship of the various components can be defined through these details. Our passage provides a beautiful example.

The first step in assembling the Mishcan was erecting the tent. The central element of the Mishcan was the Ark – the Aron. Therefore, once the tent was erected, the Aron was placed inside. Generally, the other components were added in a specific order. This order corresponded to the distance of the component from the Aron. In other words, the objects closest to the Aron were installed first. These were the Menorah (the candelabra), the Shulchan (the table), and the incense altar. The sacrificial altar was located in the courtyard of the Mishcan. It was farther away from the Aron than the previous items. Therefore, the sacrificial altar was installed after the Menorah, Shulchan and incense altar. However, there is an exception to this order. The laver was located in the courtyard. It was placed between the sacrificial altar and the Mishcan. It was closer to the Aron than the sacrificial altar. Therefore, we would expect it to be installed before the sacrificial altar. Yet, the installation of the sacrificial altar preceded the placement of the laver!

Rav Chaim Soloveitchik Ztl explains that in order to answer this question, we must review the command regarding the laver. This command is found in the beginning of Parshat Ki Tisa. There, Hashem commands Moshe to construct the laver and place it between the Mishcan and the sacrificial altar. Rav Chaim points out that this command defines the location of the laver in relation to the Mishcan and the altar. This

location emerges only after the Mishcan and altar are in place. In other words, no point can be defined as "between the Mishcan and the sacrificial altar", until the Mishcan and altar are in place. This answers our question. The laver could not be installed until after the altar. This is because the location of the laver is defined relative to the altar and the Mishcan. This location only emerges after the altar is installed.

"And it was that in the first month of the second year, on the first day of that month the Mishcan was erected." (Shemot 40:17)

The Mishcan is completed and brought to Moshe. Moshe erects the Mishcan on the first day of Nisan, in the second year of the sojourn in the wilderness. This was the eighth day of the inauguration of the Mishcan. On this day, the service in the Mishcan was performed by Moshe and the kohanim. After this day, all service would be performed by the kohanim. Moshe would no longer serve in the Mishcan. Moshe was not a kohen. Yet, on this eighth day of the inauguration and the previous seven days Moshe served as a priest. Why was Moshe appointed for this task? The service was assigned to Ahron and his sons. How could Moshe serve in the place of the kohanim?

The commentaries offer various answers to this question. One of the most interesting solutions is provided by Gershonides. He explains that Moshe was "the father of the priesthood and had given birth to it". What is Gershonides telling us? Moshe was not Ahron's father! He was Ahron's brother. He had not given birth to the kohanim. None were his children! It is clear that Gershonides' statement is not to be understood literally. Instead, Gershonides is explaining an important concept underlying the selection of the kohanim to serve in the Temple. The kohanim were not chosen simply because they are the descendants of Ahron. Neither was Ahron selected purely on the basis of his own merit. Ahron was chosen because he was Moshe's brother. Similarly, his descendants are kohanim not merely because Ahron is their ancestor. They are descendants of Moshe's brother. This relationship is essential to their status as priests. Gershonides is explaining that Moshe is the father of the institution of priesthood. Without him, Ahron would not have merited to be selected as Kohen Gadol. Neither would his children be kohanim. This explains the basis of Moshe's qualification to serve as a kohen. He was the source of the kohanim's sanctity. If the kohanim served by virtue of their relationship to Moshe, it follows that Moshe could serve. □

Footnotes:

Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, Chidushai HaGRIZ on T'NaCH and Aggadah, Parshat Pekuday. Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), p 457.