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Second tries aren't for losers, just another chance to win

by rabbi judah dardik

Vayakhel

Exodus 35:1-38:20

Kings I 7:40-50

Haven't we heard all this before? After spending more than two weeks giving us the design specifications for the Mishkan (Tabernacle), the portable temple used by the Jewish people for more than 400 years from the Exodus until the construction of Solomon's Temple, the Torah spends this week and next week telling us that it did in fact get done as directed.

Why bother telling us this? The Torah doesn't give detail that every other command given to Moshe was followed, so why here?

Perhaps the realization that this project was a special case, as the Talmud (Megillah 10B) suggests that the day on which the Mishkan was completed was as joyous for HaShem as the day heaven and earth were created.

Still, why was that the case? And why does the Talmud say it was so joyous for HaShem? It should be a joyous day for us!

The commentary of the Ramban, in his introduction to the book of Exodus, offers an insight that could prove helpful. He characterizes it as "the book of redemption," even though he knows full well that the story of leaving Egypt makes up only the first half of its text. Why call the entire volume by that name? It is noted that redemption takes many forms, ranging from the physical to the personal and spiritual.

Taking a look at the book in its entirety, one notices that it is dominated by three different topics: the Exodus from Egypt; the receipt of the Torah at Mount Sinai; and the building of the Mishkan. Is there a common thread? Maybe, in that all three involve an initial vision that fails and is then followed by a second chance.

In Egypt, Moshe comes to redeem us, and when it doesn't work right away, the people are very hard on him. So much so that he doesn't want to do this anymore and needs a pep talk from HaShem to continue. We are given a second chance, and successfully leave our lives of slavery.

On Mount Sinai, the first tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments are given to Moshe, but smashed when he descends the mountain to discover us worshipping a golden calf. (This is a long-standing Jewish "no-no.") After pleading with HaShem to gain forgiveness, Moshe ascends again and returns with a second set of tablets and commandments.

In terms of the Mishkan, the plain reading of the text is that the command to build it precedes the golden calf (in the Torah portions of Terumah and Tetzaveh), but it is built and accounted for afterward (Vayakhel and Pekudei). Thus, even after we committed idolatry, Hashem's presence came to rest and be perceptible in the center for worship that we constructed.

The book of Shemot is the book of redemption for great beginnings that soured, offering them another chance to flourish. The Torah thus takes the time to teach that we did in fact follow through on all of the design plans, every last detail, even after the golden calf.

What do we learn about those second chances? From Egypt we see that it takes the will to want to reconcile, as HaShem has to coax Moshe to re-engage with the Jewish people. From Sinai we see that it requires communication, as Moshe prays that we be spared. And from the Mishkan we learn that it takes time and effort, as the project took the combined labor and contribution of the nation over a period of months (part of why it is the model and definition of creative activity to be avoided on Shabbat).

So why are we taught that HaShem was so happy?

Possibly because the successful construction of the Mishkan, according to the exact specifications, demonstrated that second chances need not feel inferior to the first attempt. They aren't tainted, but rather are new chances to begin and move forward together like creation of heaven and earth. Reconciliation can bring a "sense of joy" not only to the people who strayed, but even to HaShem who takes us back.

Even when we err, and err badly, we can begin anew.

Rabbi Judah Dardik is the spiritual leader at Orthodox Beth Jacob in Oakland. He can be reached at Rabbi@BethJacobOakland.org.