

D'VAR TORAH

Vayak'heil-P'kudei

by Soren Winikoff

My Torah portion, Vayak'heil-P'kudei, takes place about a year after the Israelites were freed from Egypt and were wandering in the desert. It talks about the building of the Tabernacle or the Mishkan—a holy place for the Jewish people meant to travel with them as they moved from place to place. In my Torah portion, G-d gave Moses detailed instructions for constructing the Mishkan when he received the 613 Commandments.

When you first read Vayak'heil-P'kudei, it may not seem all that interesting because it's mostly a list of weights, measures, materials, names, and instructions for the Tabernacle. But maybe it's not a coincidence that I was assigned this Torah portion because I come from a family of artists, designers, and makers. And when I started to look into the text, this portion raised many questions.

The question that stood out most to me was about the materials they used. The materials listed were: gold, silver, copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns finely woven; goat's hair, tanned ram skins, and dolphin skins; acacia wood; Lapis lazuli, and other stones for setting. They also mention oil for anointing, spices for the anointing oil, and aromatic incense. These seem like normal materials—but not for a group of people that had just been enslaved and were wandering in the middle of nowhere. This led me to my main question about this Torah portion—where did they get these materials, and what does this tell us about their surroundings and situation?

I was able to learn quite a lot from the commentary in my Torah binder. Many of the materials were likely found in their immediate surroundings. For example, the crimson dye was called *tola'at shani* came from squeezing the “crimson worm” or “sheild louse”—found on the branches of oak trees. The blue was derived from a Mediterranean shellfish, and the purple color was made by adding certain chemicals to the blue. Some materials, such as the dyes, were found in their area, but they needed preparation and processing. Other materials, like lapis lazuli, were most likely acquired through trade. This told me that they had connections to other people living around them.

When I looked outside of my Torah portion, I learned that in the passage of Exodus, when the Israelites were leaving Egypt, they took some materials with them. One verse mentioned that they took livestock. That may explain some of the animal skins used in the building of the Mishkan. I also learned that, interestingly enough, Moses told them to steal what they could from the Egyptians, so they took metals, such as gold and silver.

In my Torah portion, Moses asks people to bring materials to be used in the Tabernacle. In fact, they brought so much that Moses had to ask them to stop. The translation goes like this: “Moses thereupon had this proclamation made throughout the camp: ‘Let no man or woman make further effort towards gifts for the sanctuary!’ So the people stopped bringing: their efforts had been more than

enough for all the tasks to be done.” (Exodus 36:6-7) Later, it says that all the skilled women spun with their own hands and brought what they had spun. All of this shows they were community invested in the group interest, and on top of that, they were a community of makers. This is interesting to me because making is a very important part of Jewish culture, from the Challah we eat on Shabbat to the Menorah we light on Hanukkah. This is an example of where the community came together collectively to make something beautiful to benefit everyone.

I still had more of my question to answer - what does this tell us about their surroundings and situation?

I happened to stumble upon a very interesting passage in Exodus chapter twelve--verse 38. In verse 38, it mentions a mixed multitude of people leaving Egypt. I was very confused. I thought that the Jewish people were slaves that had been freed! So, who were the mixed multitude? I looked through the commentary, and historic commentators have said that it referred to all the people that had converted to Judaism. This may be true, but I also thought this passage raised questions about their interactions with other cultures.

During my studies with my tutor Steve, we talked a lot about Jewish music. One aspect that we discussed was that Jewish people have been wandering for a lot of their history, and when they interacted with other groups, they adapted and took little parts of each culture. While reading verse 38, I wondered if this is what they are thinking about.

As Rabbi Lekach-Rosenberg taught me, Torah is about puzzling over, thinking about, agreeing, and sometimes disagreeing in order to draw conclusions, understand and interpret the text. So, I think that verse 38 is addressing the fact that the Israelites interacted with many cultures. They adopted parts of each and took what they learned on their journey.

At first, I didn't know how this related to my first question about the materials, but then I realized that if there were other people there, they might have brought different skills, materials, or tools that might have helped build the Tabernacle.

The Israelites received a commandment that told them to build the Tabernacle. It had many detailed instructions and many materials, but it didn't tell them how to find any of it. They needed connections to carry out the task. They gathered not only materials from other groups but also skills and knowledge, without which the process of building the Mishkan wouldn't have been possible. We may not notice it, but even today, as a society, we are still mixing and taking ideas from each other and from other cultures. As we create and build, it is important to remember, just like the Tabernacle, nothing is done alone. We work, we build, and we create as a community—to overcome challenges and to create a better world.

Thank you for being here today as part of my community.

Shabbat Shalom