

Parshat Vayak'hel - Feb. 26, 2022

Davar Torah by Linda Stanger

Shabbat Shalom. I'm Linda Stanger. I'm a new member of the minyan, but a long-time friend. I'm in the process of moving from my house of over 30 years in West Hartford, Ct to the Boston area to be closer to my daughter and granddaughter as part of my retirement plan. I'm moving from a community that I have been a part of for over 50 years. This passage has been leading me to think a great deal about place and about time.

As Steve noted a few weeks ago, this is not the most accessible parshah for me. As a semi-retired social worker, Parshah Vayakhel and the few preceding parshiot have always seemed somewhat irrelevant to me. I signed up for this parshah simply because it coincided with my birthday. And when I opened the Tanach my first reaction was oops. I relate to the human stories, the rules and traditions that expand on how we are to interact with other people and what it means to be a partner in Tikkun Olam. But THIS collection of parshiot are all about sockets and gold cups and crimson threads. These parshiot are for those who connect to the world through visual arts and physical interactions with tools!

While I have been searching for what I was supposed to learn from Vayakhel, I have also been disassembling my house in Connecticut as we prepare the house for sale. Donating, throwing away, selling on eBay. As I sort through old papers, souvenirs, pictures and more I have felt that I'm on a carnival ride through my personal history: kids, work, personal connections, a place of health and sickness, shiva and chagim. All those years are telescoped into a few boxes. Add to that all of us have experienced disequilibrium regarding place and time around COVID-induced changes in every aspect of our lives.

My sense of place and time needs to be strengthened. Perhaps yours as well. And as we journeyed in B'midbar, in this very parshah, perhaps Moshe felt he needed to help us renew our collective sense of time and place. Trauma in Egypt, living in portable tents, war in the desert, not knowing what the next day would bring or what will be expected of us. A renewed sense of time and place needed attention then too. I was especially interested in what I could learn about the significance of Jewish time specifically. As I slide back and forth between Connecticut and Boston, between the

past and the future, what does Jewish wisdom offer me to keep me from falling into an abyss of confusion.

I asked my friend and teacher Rabbi Peretz Rodman. Whom many of you know, to translate the name of the parshah, Vayakhel. He told me that the root of Vayakel is the same as that of kehila.

“Moshe convoked the whole Israelite community” (Hebrew)

Peretz asks, “If ‘the people’ are already an edah, what does Moshe need to do - or think he needs to do - to make them a kehila?”

This question helped guide me through the rest of the material as I searched for a deeper understanding of Jewish time.

In March of 2020, as the pandemic began to descend upon the entire world, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, delivered a d’var Torah on a livestream address. He wanted to address those of us experiencing the first Shabbat when many synagogues would be closed due to Covid. It happened to be the Shabbat of Vayakhel. He acknowledges how disorienting this situation is, how frightening, how sad. Then, From the Talmud, he shares this story.

Talmud Berakhot 7b:27, translation by Sefaria

“As a prelude to another of the statements by Rabbi Yohanan in the name of Rabbi Shimon be Yohai, the Gemara relates the following incident. Rabbi Yitzhak said to Rav Nachman: Why did the Master not come to the synagogue to pray? Rav Nahman said to him: I was weak and unable to come. Rabbi Yitzhak said to him: Let the Master gather 10 individuals, a minyan, at your home and pray. Rav Nachman said to him. It is difficult for me to impose upon the members of the community to come to my home to pray with me (Sefer Mitzvot Gadol). Rabbi Yitzhak suggested another option: The master should tell the congregation to send a messenger when the congregation is praying so you may pray at the same time. “

In other words, its suggested that even if we cannot share the same SPACE, by putting ourselves at the same TIME, our prayers will be meaningful.

Rabbi Sacks points out that although Parshah Vayakhel is about sockets and fabrics, Moshe begins with Shabbat. In instructing theedah, Moshe begins by saying,

“These are the things that the LORD has commanded you to do: On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord.”

Only then does Moshe continue with instructions regarding donations of materials for the mishkan and what to do with them. In other words, observing Shabbat is the FIRST STEP even before this important task of building the mishkan.

Rashi explores the structure of the opening lines of the Parshah as follows. To paraphrase Rashi says,

while we are being given the gift of instructions on building a sanctuary, we are in fact being given a second gift. One is instructions on how sacred space and the other is instructions on sacred time.

Not one sanctuary but two, one in space, one in time. History can attest to the fact that if the physical sanctuary doesn't hold up, by keeping shabbat, sacred time, less ephemeral than a physical space, we can sustain ourselves. That is even if sacred space is lost, we can still maintain our kehilah through maintaining sacred time. Hence the Rabbis put value on davening at the same time, even if they could not be in the same place.

When I light Shabbat candles on a Friday night whether alone or with a large crowd, I have a vision of candles being lit across the world in a wave as each time zone begins the 25 hours of Shabbat. And I also have a vision of the centuries of Jews that have done so before me and will do so in the future. I feel connected both horizontally and vertically if you will.

To broaden the idea a bit, whenever we place ourselves and our daily lives in Jewish time, be it Shabbat, life cycle events like birth, marriage, and death we connect historically, geographically, metaphorically, as a kahal. Even during the pandemic, we have found ways to be together even if it is just knowing that our community is doing the same thing at the same time even if we are not in the same place. Zoom Sederim, Shivas, brit milahs, livestream options for study and for prayer. Or just knowing that

when I light candles in my house, in Boston or Connecticut, I am sharing this moment with other Jews throughout the world and throughout history.

It is said more than Jews keep Shabbat; Shabbat keeps the Jews. Despite all the detail about building a building, perhaps then this is the distinction of this parshah at least for me at this moment in my personal history. By naming the parshah "Vayakhel" the Rabbis recognize the significance of the mishkan to maintain our community AND emphasize the power of sacred time in maintaining the kahal. The mishkan grounds us, but Jewish time propels us forward. Nehama Leibowitz notes that Rabbi Heschel in his book, "The Sabbath," asserts that Judaism is more concerned with time than space. Rabbi Heschel says notes,

"It is indeed a unique occasion at which the distinguished word kadosh is used for the first time. (End of creation story in Bereshit). How extremely significant is the fact that it is applied to time. "And Gd blessed the seventh day and made it holy." There is no reference in the record of creation to any object in space that would be endowed with the quality of holiness."

So COVID transforms, but we might first take to heart the first gift of Vayak'hel, Shabbat and Jewish time as a foundation on which to build.

Perhaps then, as often happens, Vayak'hel has turned out to be exactly the parshah I (and maybe you) need at this moment of my life. I am so grateful to the minyan for providing a soft-landing place for Bruce and I in this leg of our journey and to allow us the opportunity to help build a new mishkan, in time if not space, in which we can all grow and be sustained. May we all be blessed with the strength that comes from being a part of both Jewish time and Jewish place.

Shabbat Shalom.