

Put Your Piercings in the Pot: Melting as One to Build a Mishkan

Aliza Gans '09 | BronfmanTorah | Vayakhel 2016

Aliza Gans '09 is the Staff Fellow for the Bronfman Fellowships. She is a recent Brandeis grad, Brooklyn transplant, and loves not having homework: more time for art, culinary experiments, and percussion.

The entire people of Israel assemble before Moses. Women and men, bakers and basket weavers, midwives and merchants, shepherds and vintners -- all have atoned. Standing elevated on a mountain (like he usually does), Moses instructs the people, "These are the things God commands: Work for six days. The seventh is holy for you. Rest completely then. Do work and you'll die."

Moses adds, "And I also need a contribution for God. Anyone who is of a willing heart can bring an offering of whatever you can...gold, silver or copper; turquoise, purple and crimson wool; linen and goat's hair; red-dyed rams' skin and multicolored *tahash* skins; acacia wood; oil for the eternal lamp and spices for the anointing oil and the incense; stones for the breastplate...it's time to build a Tabernacle."

The people return with their lump sum offerings: skins, dyes, and stones, and [Rashi even says](#), "golden ornaments worn by the women upon their private

parts...from the place of licentiousness.”

I don't think Moses was so desperate for offerings that he needed private part piercings to fill the gold quota to build the mishkan. Rather, he wanted a call to action that everyone could participate in as long as all donors were “of a willing heart:”

(Exodus 35:5)
Take from among yourselves an offering unto the LORD, whoever is of a willing heart, let them bring it, the LORD'S offering: gold, and silver, and brass;

קָחוּ מֵאִתְּכֶם תְּרוּמָה
לַיהוָה כֹּל נָדִיב לִבּוֹ
וּבִיאָה אֶת תְּרוּמַת יְהוָה
זָהָב וְכֶסֶף וְנְחָשֶׁת:

On the final day of Moses's mishkan campaign, they had accumulated an overabundance of riches:

“For the stuff they had was sufficient for all the work to make it, and too much (Exodus 36:7).

Moses created a melting pot in which all contributions mingled and eventually became one. Imagine that: a signet ring could have fused with one of licentiousness to create a dwelling for God.

And equally remarkable was the way in which donors didn't have a vision about the use of the donated assets. (Can you picture Bezalel, the master craftsman in this parsha, engraving, “In loving memory of Herb and Ethel Rosen” into the priestly

breastplate?) Israelites just gave, trusting it would be used in good taste. Honor was conferred solely by the act of contribution.

You may remember another instance, previously in Exodus, where after some wandering, Israelites shed their gold and melted it into a ritual object. The golden calf was molded from jewelry Israelites broke off their bodies (פָּרְקוּ נִזְמֵי הַזָּהָב). Cecil B. DeMille gives [this cinematic moment around 5 minutes](#) in his bibliodrama, but the Torah constructs it in one short verse:

(Exodus 32:4)

And [Aaron] received it at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made it a molten calf; and they said: 'This is your god, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt.'

וַיִּקַּח מֵיָדָם וַיִּצַר אֹתוֹ
בְּחֶרֶט וַיַּעֲשֵׂהוּ עֵגֶל מִסַּבָּה
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵיךָ
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלֶיךָ
מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

The lack of intention behind the aggregation of the materials for the golden calf (the jewelry was “broken off”) separates it from the construction of the Tabernacle. In parshat Vayakhel, every detail is deliberate, from the cubits of acacia wood used to construct the ark, to the unique way in which olives ripened on the tops of the trees so that the lamp oil was “beaten and yet clear” (Exodus 27:20).

Unlike the golden calf, which was hammered whole with a graving tool, the mishkan was constructed so that it could be portable. The skins, woven tarps for the roof, the lamps -- everything collapsed as the nation wandered. It was a source of public pride and communal ownership toted throughout their journey. When the Israelites resettled, the mishkan was reassembled in the center of the camp and God was able to reside within.

In contrast, when the golden calf was destroyed, it was ground into dust and the people were forced to ingest it. They needed to physically swallow their pride, conceal their sin, and personally bear the shame:

(Exodus 32: 20)
And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it with fire, and ground it to powder, and strewed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it.

וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הַעֲגֹל אֲשֶׁר
עָשׂוּ בְּיַד-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶשׁוּיֹטְחָן
עַד אֲשֶׁר-דָּק וַיִּזְרַק עַל-פְּנֵי
הַמַּיִם וַיִּשְׁקֹא אֶת-בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל:

It then seems that three things are essential to creating a Tabernacle:

1. An egalitarian crowd-sourcing platform affording everyone a chance to give
2. A space where all those gifts mingle and lose their identifying source
3. Flexibility and openness to movement

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The amalgamation of everyone's gifts alone does not create a community everyone has a stake in; only when these individual gifts fuse together can they become whole: a singular vessel for the divine. The community is also mobile. When the needs of the people change, the Tabernacle is unhinged but then reconstructed as strong as ever in the center of the community once a new camp is established.

I am also wandering. A recent college graduate starting my first job in New York City and living in a new apartment, I often feel like a mishkan, constantly being deconstructed and restored with every new move and experience. When my inner fortifications are pulled apart, I go with the flow. I recognize the great joy in wandering: I can take my skills and abilities with me wherever I go, knowing that it's not the raw materials that make a divine vessel, but how my substances synergize to find new solutions to old problems. I have noticed that when I am slow to collaborate with others, I often take any shortcomings personally because it is a reflection of my ego. By removing the self from the equation, and throwing my talents into the creative melting pot, I construct a space for others to offer their skills with a willing heart. I can take that relationship anywhere, even in a desert for 40 years.



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