

Two Covenants — One Relationship

Elon Swartz ('12) | BronfmanTorah | 2015

A Los Angeles native, Elon Swartz is a first-year student at Princeton University who plans to concentrate in history or politics. Before starting Princeton, Elon took a gap year at Yeshivat Har Eztion, an Israeli institution of higher Jewish learning. Aside from his love for baseball, which has waned in recent years, Elon also take pleasure in Netflix, Ernest Hemingway novels, Broadway, and orange juice. When he isnot studying for an exam, Elon can likely be found learning Torah, reading Israeli news, or drinking black coffee

This week's Torah portion, *Vayakhel*, details the structure of the *Mishkan*, the Sanctuary. The narrative provides a painstakingly detailed account of various altars, the Menorah, the Ark, and the Sanctuary's vessels. Next week, when we conclude the Book of Exodus with *Pekudei*, we will read about the various priestly vestments, the *Bigdei Kehunah*.

But just three weeks ago, when we read the Torah portion of *Terumah*, we learned of the *Mishkan*'s structure. And the following week's portion, *Teztaveh*, described the process of inaugurating the priests, and in doing so, detailed the *Bigdei Kehunah*. Why do *Vayakhel* and *Pekudei* repeat the minutaei of previously read material?

Ki Tissa is the Torah portion sandwiched between *Terumah-Teztaveh* and *Vayakhel-Pekudei*. An understanding of the dramatic events of *Ki Tissa* may provide us with some clarity.

“And [Aaron] fashioned [the gold] into a molten calf and [the Israelites] said, ‘These are

your God, Israel, that raised you out of the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 32:4)

Medieval and modern commentaries have long disputed the precise nature of the Israelite’s behavior towards the golden calf, but one fact remains clear — those who participated in the act sinned against God.

Throughout the remainder of the Torah portion of *Ki Tissa*, Moses prays to God on behalf of the Israelites in

an attempt to secure divine mercy. After a lengthy and impassioned argument with Moses, God ultimately agrees to pardon the Israelites (the scope and extent of this pardon is unclear in the text and disputed amongst commentaries). Forming a second covenant with the Israelites, God commands Moses to inscribe a second set of tablets:

“Inscribe for yourself a second [set of] stone tablets like **the first** [set], and I [will] write on the tablets the words that were on **the first** tablets that you broke.” (Exodus 34:1)

God emphasizes to Moses that the second set of tablets will be “like the first” and that words contained therein will be the same as those “on the first.” Seemingly, an important connection exists between the first and second sets of tablets. Medieval commentator Rashi, however, has a different approach.

In his running gloss on this verse, Rashi cites a well-known rabbinic interpretation. He points out that God tells Moses, “inscribe **for yourself**,” and asserts that while God engraved the first tablets, it is Moses’ duty to inscribe to second tablets “for himself” because he broke the previous pair. Rashi essentially distinguishes between the two sets of tablets, the two covenants, the two revelations at Sinai.

In his comments on Exodus 31:18, Rashi argues that the God only commands Moses to construct the Sanctuary *after* the sin of the golden calf. According to Rabbi Chanoch Waxman, Rashi is most likely motivated by a “tension between the physical and the material on the one hand, and the immaterial and metaphysical on the other hand.”^[1] In other words, because God seemingly demonstrates on Mount Sinai that “His very presence is wholly immaterial” and that “He is but a voice,” the idea of a Sanctuary, a confined physical space in which the presence of God rests, appears problematic.^[2] Rashi’s view, that the Sanctuary is a response to the golden calf, seems to indicate a sort of compromise on the part of the Transcendent God, a concession to the Israelites, who are not yet ready to divorce themselves from material worship.

Given the centrality of the Sanctuary in the Bible, as well as its particular prevalence throughout the Book of Leviticus, I am hard pressed to find Rashi's view compelling. In certain respects, the position of the medieval commentator Nachmanides is more appealing to me.

Nachmanides (Exodus 25:1) argues that the *Mishkan* serves as a microcosm for the revelation at Mount Sinai. At Sinai, Moses ascended the mountain, the priests stood from a distance, and the Israelites remained at the foot of the slope. In the *Mishkan*, the high priest was to enter the innermost sanctuary, the priests were to serve in the outer hall, and the Israelites were to remain in the courtyard. At Sinai, God revealed Himself. In the *Mishkan*, "always accompanying Israel would be the Divine Glory which had appeared to them at Mount Sinai."¹³¹

The Torah portions of *Terumah-Teztaveh* and *Vayakhel-Pekudei* describe, in great detail, this microcosmic Sinai, this meeting place between God and Israel. Between these portions lies *Ki Tissa*, an account of the sin of the golden calf and the second revelation at Sinai that follows. Perhaps the detailed repetition of the *Mishkan*'s structure in this week's Torah portion stresses the idea that even after their enormous sin, the Israelites may still meet with God. Due to the Almighty's mercy, communion with the the Divine is possible even after the Israelites' act of abandonment. In this respect, the second set of tablets is just "like the first."

Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein, head of Yeshivat Har Etzion, analogizes the repetition of the *Mishkan*'s structure to the weddings plans of soon-to-be spouses.¹⁴¹ When two engaged individuals plan their wedding, they pay attention to every minute detail of the upcoming celebration, from the size and shape of the tables, to the precise dimensions and colors of all tuxedos and dresses. Similarly, when God commands the Israelites to build Him a *Mishkan* in *Terumah-Teztaveh*, he describes the dimensions and compositions of all vessels and clothing contained therein. Like excited fiances awaiting their wedding day, the God and Israel of *Terumah-Teztaveh* prepare for a wedding of sorts, a communion of the human and the Divine in the soon-to-be-built Sanctuary.

If one fiance abandons the other just before the wedding, all of the grand plans go to waste. A once glorious event-in-the-making becomes the relic of a relationship lost to infidelity.

Even if the fiance returns and apologizes, and the two partners decide to resume their relationship, one can hardly imagine that they will plan another magnificent event. The pain associated with the process of organizing another wedding will prove much too difficult to endure. The relationship will be saved, but the lingering wounds may never disappear.

In *Vayakhel-Pekudei*, the Torah presents a wholly different paradigm of the human-God relationship. The Israelites may have abandoned their fiance at the foot of the mountain, mere moments before the consumation of their marriage, but when they return and apologize, God prepares yet another wedding. In painstaking detail, God and the Israelites review the structure, dimensions, and component parts of the Sanctuary where they will meet once more. Instead of festering wounds, mercy provides absolution. The relationship begins anew.

May we draw hope from the knowledge that, even at the most difficult of moments, we may renew our relationship with the Divine.

^[1] Chanoch Waxman, “Of Sequence and Sanctuary,” in *Torah MiEtzion: New Readings in Tanach - Exodus*, eds. Ezra Bick and Yaakov Beasley (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2012), 349-359, 352.

^[2] Ibid.

^[3] Translation of Nachmanides from Menachem Liebttag, “The Mishkan: Ideal First Choice,” in *Torah MiEtzion: New Readings in Tanach - Exodus*, eds. Ezra Bick and Yaakov Beasley (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2012), 341-348, 345.

^[4] Rabbi Moshe Taragin related this analogy to me in the name of Rabbi Lichtenstein. I have yet to find it in writing.

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