

Parshot Vayakhail

Exodus 35-38.20

Two years ago we read this parsha as part of a double parsha because that year did not have a leap month. This year has two months of Adar, Adar I and Adar II, so our parsha is just Vayakhail, which is Exodus 35.1-38.20.

I would normally consider this parsha to be dry and somewhat lifeless, but in reality there are lots of things to consider. While most of Genesis and Exodus deal with people and events, the end of Exodus and the rest of the Torah are devoted to life in the deserts of Sinai. One of the first things that God wanted to do was to construct the Sanctuary for the Ark and the Ten Commandments.

While I am a poor judge of artistic creations, there is no doubt that this parsha is full of wonderful artistic detail. It can be said that Hebrew Art suffered because the Torah forbade making images of angels and idols, but the entire Sanctuary, the Ark, the Priestly Garments and the Altar were truly a magnificent spectacle. While the Pharaoh's court in Egypt was a sight to behold, when you consider that the Israelites in the desert possessed very little compared to the Egyptians, what God commanded them to build was nothing less than fantastic. God asked those who were willing to contribute gold, silver and brass, blue, purple and scarlet linens, red ram's skins, sealskins, acacia wood, oil, incense and onyx stones. Bimbam.com stresses that the result was a freewill offering from the people that met the Lord's needs. It was an opportunity for each of them to get closer to their God, and they responded extraordinarily well.

God then told Moses to select Bezalel of the tribe of Judah and Oholiab of the tribe of Dan to be the master craftsmen. The Torah notes that God specifically selected men from both major and minor tribes so that all the tribes would feel they could participate equally in the construction of the Sanctuary.

Chapter 36 concerns itself with the curtains, the wooden framework and the veil and screen. Chapter 37 details the Ark, the table, the candlesticks and the altar of incense and anointing oil. Chapter 38 describes the construction of the court and the altar of burnt-offering and the laver. The next parsha deals with the priests' vestments, specifically the ephod, the breastplate, the tunics and headgear and the holy crown, and ends with the final construction of the Sanctuary.

Once built, a cloud covered the Sanctuary and the spirit of Lord filled the tabernacle. This presence was known as the Shechinah. Not even Moses was allowed to enter the tent of meeting when the Lord's presence was there. Randomly, the Shechinah would move, and when it did, the children of Israel

would continued their journey. If it did not move, neither did they. The cloud was upon the tabernacle by day and a fire was present at night.

Interestingly enough, during the construction of the Sanctuary, there was neither rebellion nor crisis among the people. They were unified under Moses and recognized that the God who brought them out of Egypt and gave them the Ten Commandments was indeed with them in the desert.

My parsha source notes that the Ark of the Covenant has a number of mysterious aspects to it. One is obvious (with the help of a few calculations). The rings used to pass the staves through would not have been able to support the weight of the objects contained within the Ark, yet they did. Another, more fascinating mystery, comes from tradition. The distance between the walls of the Holy of Holies was only equal to the sum of the distance between each wall and the side of the Ark; hence the Ark took up no physical space. Another mystical aspect was that any Hebrew who directly touched the ark would die. Note, however, that when the Philistines later captured and touched the ark, they did not die, but suffered from a series of curses.

We are one parsha away from the end of The Book of Exodus. What begins with enslavement in Egypt and the inability to be close to God is about to end with God's presence among His people who are now free to serve Him and achieve their destiny.

The Haftarat associated with this parsha and the next one deal with construction of the Great Temple in Jerusalem under King Solomon. The sections come from First Kings chapters 7 and 8. If you think that the Sanctuary in the desert was splendid, I am sure you know that the Great Temple was a most magnificent sight and the intricate details of its seven year construction are found in Chapter 7. Unfortunately, all that is left of the temple area in Jerusalem after its destruction by the Romans in 70 AD is the western wall. And that concludes our readings for today.