

We have reached the end of the Book of Exodus, the story of our progression from generations of slavery to the beginnings of peoplehood. Our difficult and fitful journey will continue, for far longer than anyone realizes at this time. But now, work on the *mishkan*, the people's portable spiritual focal point, has been completed and the *mishkan* has been set up for the first time. The final verses are remarkable in that they look both backward and forward. Even more remarkable, is the way in which they mirror the end of the creation story. "And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good ..." (1:31) bears uncanny resemblance to 39:43 "Moses saw the entire work, and lo! They had done it as the Lord had commanded ..." The end of that verse, "So Moses blessed them." reflects Genesis 28 "And God blessed them (Adam and Chava), and 2:3 "And God blessed the seventh day ..." Verse 40:33 in our parashah, "Moses completed the work." parallels Genesis 2:2 "And God completed on the seventh day His work that He did." Finally, 40:9 in our parashah "... and you shall sanctify it (the *mishkan*) echoes the end of Genesis 2:3 "... and He sanctified it (the seventh day). The number 7, the hallmark of the creation narrative, returns twice in Pekudei: "... as the Lord commanded Moses" appears seven times in chapter 39 during the making of the priestly garments, and seven more times in chapter 40 when Moses sets up the *mishkan*. Even the most perfunctory reading of our sacred texts will reveal many repetitions and text parallels, which have given rise to worlds of interpretation. But intellectual games aside, there is a profound relationship between the end of Exodus and the creation narrative. What exactly is the *mishkan* with its excruciatingly detailed architecture and furnishings, not to mention the elaborate priestly vestments and the equally elaborate initiation and sacrificial rituals still to come? It is none other than a microcosm – a mini-universe created with human precision and human wisdom, a microcosm that mirrors HaShem's creation. In the *tohu vavohu* desert wilderness in which that tiny, motley group of former slaves finds itself, the *mishkan* is an oasis of orderliness, and after the debacle of the golden calf, it is living proof that HaShem has not rejected them and will continue to protect them. Our ancestors in the desert are often described as ungrateful, fractious, chaotic, fickle, and fearful, and not without reason. The tiny word *vayehi*, with the innocuous meaning "and it came to pass," appears in chapter 40:17: "It came to pass ... that the *mishkan* was set up." Citing the beginning of Megillat Esther – and Purim is coming soon – Tractate Megillah 10b contains a lengthy discourse on the ominous meaning of this word, which indeed, throughout our sacred writings presages impending grief. It already appears in Genesis 6:1, "And it came to pass when men began to multiply ..." and is followed in 6:5 by "And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth." Likewise, the completion of the *mishkan* does not ensure a smooth and happy road ahead. Moses shows the people that they have the capacity to be generous, creative, and collaborative enough to produce outstanding results. In short, he shows them that they have a future if they are able to integrate a new image of themselves. They are *bonei brit*, the People of the Covenant, and as such they are partners with HaShem, engaged in human acts of creation to parallel HaShem's divine acts of creation. We humans have enormous potential – for good, but sadly, tragically, also for evil. We can build structures where the spirit of HaShem can dwell, but we can also wreak tremendous havoc, as we are seeing now in terrible detail all over the world. If we are positively engaged, our *jetzer ha tov*, our good inclination, will prevail to the benefit of all. But if we let our *jetzer hara*, our evil inclination, dominate, we will waste our precious time in ultimately disastrous pursuits. Midrash Pesikta Rabbatai 5 tells a delightful story about a king who asks his quarrelsome wife to sew him a purple cloak. While she is busy working, there is no quarreling. After admiring and praising the finished object, the king exclaims, "Woe is me!" Explaining his reaction to his puzzled queen, he tells her, "While you were busy working, you didn't make me angry. Now that you are finished, I am afraid you will make me angry again." Obviously the poor king could think of no further tasks to occupy his contentious wife, and even Moses, great leader as he was, could not keep his contentious charges busy enough to ensure a peaceful journey. But HaShem offers a whole world of things to occupy us for a lifetime. We just have to recognize them and then act conscientiously and to the best of our abilities. It's up to us, whether we occupy ourselves with positive or with negative pursuits. We can gratefully acknowledge and use the bounty HaShem provides to collaborate peacefully for the good of all, or we can complain and quarrel in pursuit of our own selfish desires, destroying rather than building. The age of Temple worship with all its elaborate rituals belongs *baruch HaShem* to the far distant past, but there will always be *avodah*, holy work to occupy us, not only in our religious communities, but in our daily lives. Busying ourselves with worthy activities, we carry the *mishkan* forward, because we ourselves are the *mishkan*. The divine spark resides in each one of us. Guided by our *mitzvot*, we can let its light shine, and ensure that our story will not begin with that ominous word *vayehi*. It's up to each one of us!

Shabbat shalom!