

Shabbat HaChodesh is the last of the four special Shabbatot that fall between the beginning of the month of Adar and Pesach. It occurs on, or immediately before, the first of Nisan, the month of Pesach. Because the first of Nisan was the day on which HaShem announced to Moses the impending Exodus and presented instructions for its preparation, Nisan is our most important month. In the closing verses of our parashah, we read that the first of Nisan is also the date on which the *mishkan* was completed. “It was in the first month of the second year, on the first of the month, that the *mishkan* was erected.” (40:17) Accordingly, the first of Nisan is the beginning of the Jewish liturgical year, and the date from which the reign of kings was calculated. It is assigned to the Tribe of Judah, who inherited the kingship and from whom the Messiah is to come. In addition, Nisan is the first new moon of spring, the time of awakening. The overarching message of Shabbat HaChodesh is the obligation to delineate sacred times by establishing a calendar. As slaves in Egypt we had no control over our time, but with the Exodus we were given the freedom to determine our time along with the commandment to sanctify portions of it. Midrash Shemot Rabbah 15 explains: “The ministering angels said to God, ‘Master of Infinity, when do you declare the festivals?’ God said to them, ‘You and I will accept whatever Israel calculates.’ The Holy One of Blessing said to Israel, ‘In the past they were in my hands. But from now on, they are in your hands.’” Indeed, the price of autonomy is responsibility, reflected in the terms of our eternal covenant, which is predicated upon gratitude for and acknowledgement of our special relationship with HaShem, and expressed in the rituals performed by the priests in the *mishkan*. But as we know, the Israelites are woefully ignorant in the ways of freedom. In his recent book *On Freedom* [Crown, 2024] Timothy Snyder, one of the foremost specialists in the history of Central and Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and the Holocaust, argues that: “Too many of us look at freedom as the absence of state power: We think we’re free if we can do and say as we please, and protect ourselves from government overreach. But true freedom isn’t so much freedom *from* as freedom *to* (Italics mine) – the freedom to thrive, to take risks for futures we choose by working together. Freedom is the value that makes all other values possible.” Obviously, some of us have still not learned, and others have regressed. We see present and past reflected in the story of the Israelites’ tortuous 40-year trek through the wilderness as well as in the rest of our TaNaKh. The good intentions with which we begin all too often dissolve in the face of difficulty, making us susceptible to the fears and temptations that drive our basest urges. Indeed, freedom is a delicate plant that needs constant nurturing. The *mishkan* is supposed to represent the fertile soil in which the Israelites’ freedom can grow and thrive. With its highly crafted architecture and furnishings, along with the elaborate priestly vestments, it is the model universe through which the Israelites learn to practice *imitatio dei*, imitating HaShem to the best of their human ability. All of the Israelites are involved in creating the *mishkan*, and all are to participate in maintaining it and upholding the principles for which it stands. It is noteworthy that the final verses of our parashah, which end the Book of Exodus, look forward, but also backward to the end of the creation story. “And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good ...” (Genesis 1:31) resembles 39:43 “Moses saw that they had indeed done all the work exactly as God had commanded, and Moses blessed them.” These last words mirror Genesis 2:3 “And God blessed the seventh day ...” and Genesis 1:28 “And God blessed them (Adam and Chava). 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 culmination 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*. But 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 develop a new self-image. They are now *bonei brit*, the People of the Covenant, and as such they are partners with HaShem, engaged in human acts of creation which are to parallel HaShem’s divine acts of creation. We humans have enormous potential for good, but 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. But if we let our *jetzer hara*, our evil inclination, dominate, we will waste our precious time in ultimately disastrous pursuits. We can gratefully acknowledge and use what HaShem provides to collaborate peacefully in building a better world for the benefit of all, or we can complain, quarrel, and exploit in pursuit of our own selfish desires, destroying rather than building. The *mishkan* and the temples belong to the far distant past, but there will always be *avodah*, holy work to do, in our religious communities and in our daily lives. Guided by our *mitzvot*, we carry the *mishkan* forward, because we ourselves are the *mishkan*.

Shabbat Shalom and Chodesh tov!