



The Invisible Palace

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Parashat Pekudei 5784

There is something hidden in the *mishkan* (tabernacle).

Nehama Leibowitz, the great 20th century compiler of Torah commentary, calls our attention to a group of modern scholars who sensitized us to the use of repetition as a rhetorical device in the description of the building of the *mishkan*. She cites a list of the greats: Buber, Rosenzweig, Benno Jacob, Cassuto, Meir Weiss, and others, who all highlight the way key phrases in our text echo an earlier story in the Torah—the earliest, in fact.

It is the legendary Jewish philosopher Martin Buber—also a fine biblical scholar—who is credited by many modern thinkers with discovering the striking parallels between the language of the *mishkan* instructions and the story of Creation. He lays it out magnificently for us and, though it requires some rearranging, the resemblance is undeniable:

בראשית א:לא-ב:ג

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי. וַיְכַלּוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ וְכָל
צִבְאָם. וַיְכַל אֱלֹקִים בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְלָאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּשְׁבֹּת בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְכַל מְלָאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה.
וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹקִים אֶת יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וַיְקַדֵּשׁ אֹתוֹ.



Genesis 1:31-2:3

And God **saw all that God had made**, and **behold**, it was very good. And it was morning, and it was evening, one day. And the heavens and the earth **were finished**, and all their array. On the **seventh day**, **God finished God's work** which God had made, and God rested on the seventh day. And God **blessed** the seventh day, and **sanctified** it.

שמות לט:מג, לב, כד:טז, מ:לג, לט:מג, כה:ח

וַיֵּרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל הַמְּלָאכָה וְהִנֵּה עָשׂוּ אֹתָהּ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' כֵּן עָשׂוּ...
וַיִּתְּכַל כָּל עֲבֹדַת מִשְׁכָּן...
וַיִּקְרָא אֶל מֹשֶׁה בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מִתּוֹךְ הָעֶנָן...
וַיְכַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַמְּלָאכָה...
וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה...
וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם.

Exodus 39:43, 32, 24:16, 40:33, 39:43, 25:8

And Moshe **saw all of the work**, and **behold**, they had **made** it just as the Eternal had commanded....

And all the labor of the *mishkan* **was finished**...

And on the **seventh day**, God called out to Moshe from within the cloud...

And Moshe finished the work...

And Moshe **blessed** them...

Make me a **sanctuary**, and I will dwell among you.

The reverberation is stunning, and the message of this parallelism seems easy enough to extrapolate. As Leibowitz puts it:

The Lord created heaven and earth and all therein for man to dwell in, and created them in six days and rested on the seventh day. Similarly, Moshe was summoned on the seventh

day to the cloud to see the pattern of the Mishkan that it was his duty to erect, in order to provide a place on earth for the Divine Presence.¹

God made a home for us on earth, so now we make a home for God on earth. Buber's excavation through modern literary technique of the symmetry embedded in the text appears to us like a revelation.

But if Ecclesiastes (1:9) is right that there is “nothing new under the sun,” we should not be surprised to find that the rabbis of the midrashic period had already spotted much of this pattern, many centuries earlier. Here is a version we find in the Midrash Tanhuma on Parashat Pekudei:

מדרש תנחומא פקודי יא

אמר רבי יעקב ברבי אסי, למה הוא אומר, ה' אהבתי מעון ביתך ומקום משכן כבודך (תהלים כו ח), בשביל ששקול כנגד בריאת עולם. כיצד... בשביעי, ויכולו השמים והארץ. ובמשכן כתיב, ותכל כל עבודת. בבריאת העולם כתיב, ויברך אלקים. ובמשכן כתיב, ויברך אותם משה.

Midrash Tanhuma Pekudei 11

R. Ya'akov bar R. Asi said: Why does it say (in Psalm 26:8), “Eternal, I loved Your house and abode, the dwelling place of Your glory”? Because it is being equated with the creation of the world. How so?... On the seventh day, “the heavens and the earth were finished.” And with the *mishkan* it is written, “And all the labor was finished.” With the creation of the world, it is written, “And God Blessed.” And with the *mishkan*, it is written, “And Moshe blessed them.”

The very same references, suggesting the very same comparison, picked up hundreds of years earlier by our Rabbis, whose keen literary eyes were never sleeping.

¹ Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot*, Terumah 2.



And they didn't stop there. For there was one other primary link between Creation and Construction that they wanted to establish. That is, they noticed that over the course of the chapters that detail the building of the *mishkan*, the observance of Shabbat is mentioned twice, once in Parashat Ki Tissa (chapter 31), and again at the beginning of Parashat VaYakhel. Here is how VaYakhel begins:

שמות לה:א-ב

וַיִּקְהַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל עֵדֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם. אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתָם. שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יִהְיֶה לָכֶם קֹדֶשׁ שַׁבַּת שְׁבֶתוֹן לַה' כָּל הָעֹשֶׂה בּוֹ מְלָאכָה יוּמָת.

Exodus 35:1-2

Moshe gathered together the whole community of the Children of Israel and said to them, "These are the things that the Eternal has commanded you to do: On six days you shall do **work**, and on the seventh day, you will have a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Eternal; whoever does **work** on it shall be put to death."

What did our Rabbis make of this abrupt insertion of the commandment to keep the Sabbath just before the final description of the *mishkan*? Surely this can be fit into the framework of the other creation parallels we have seen so far. Shabbat is the culmination of Creation, after all—the time to stop and reflect on the work that has been done, and to refresh.

But our Rabbis went further than just observing these thematic parallels. In their discussion of laws of Shabbat in the Talmud, this passage above (from Parashat VaYakhel) contains the very phrase they use as the source for the 39 categories of prohibited work. The derivation, based on Rashi's commentary, comes from an intricate bit of play with the words, "These are the things":



תלמוד בבלי שבת צז:

והתניא רבי אומר דברים הדברים אלה הדברים אלו ל"ט מלאכות שנאמרו למשה בסיני

Talmud Bavli Shabbat 97b

It was taught: Rebbe said: “things” [counts for 2]; “the things” [makes it 3], and [the letters in the Hebrew word for] “these” [has the numerical value of 36]—these are the 39 forbidden labors that were said to Moshe at Sinai.

The interpretive method here is rather extreme. Rebbe sees the phrase, “These are the things that the Eternal has commanded you to do,” and, in order to figure out what and how many of those things there are, he gives himself permission to count up the words in the sentence, and then even the numerical value of the Hebrew letters in the word for “these,” following the numerological tradition of Gematria. With all those rules in place, he arrives at the number 39 for 39 forbidden labors.

Add to that the use of the word *melakhah* (work), as both the term for that which is forbidden on Shabbat and for that which is required to build the *mishkan*, and we soon come to the conclusion that the work that is to be forbidden on Shabbat is precisely those 39 categories of work which were required to build the *mishkan*. That is, after all, precisely, what God rested from on that first seventh day: “all the work (*melakhah*) that God had done.”

The parallel between the Sabbath and the sanctuary slowly becomes clear. We engage in work to build the *mishkan*, and then we refrain from just that work when it is completed—and then, as promised, God dwells among us. This mirrors the way that God engaged in work to build the world and then refrained from that work when it was completed. The name for that completion was “Shabbat”—the Sabbath day. And so, it turns out that this structure, the



thing we have been building now for five weeks of *parashiyyot*, is in fact Shabbat herself. It is she who will be the eternal sanctuary, in which both God and Israel shall dwell.

The *mishkan* was intended to be temporary, only lasting through the desert journey. And the Temple turned out to be temporary; physical buildings can always be destroyed. But Shabbat is to carry us through time.

These links forged with the words of the Torah—first, broadly, between the creation of world and the building of the *mishkan*, and then, specifically, between Shabbat and the completion of the *mishkan*—lend new force to R. Abraham Joshua Heschel’s famous phrasing in his book, *The Sabbath*:

The seventh day is a *palace in time* which we build.²

He may have meant that poetically, but now we are able to understand it literally: we actually **build** ourselves a Shabbat. It was not enough to create a sanctuary in space for God to dwell in, as God had done once for us. We then had to finish all the work we had done, to step back and see it completed, and then to rest and be refreshed on the seventh day—as God also once did.

And so we build and complete this palace in time again, anew, every week. We bless it with the light of our candles, and sanctify it with wine. And though our structure is invisible to the naked eye, we who sit within it know that God dwells there among us.

² *The Sabbath* (1951), p. 15, emphasis original.

