

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Tesavveh Part I

1. Mishkan, Covenant and Holiness

In the introduction to the Sinai lawgiving, Hashem articulated the goal for Israel to be a holy nation; He stated וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מְמַלְכֵת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ (“And you shall be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” [Exod. 19:6]). He instructed Moses to go to the people וְקִדְשְׁתֶּם הַיּוֹם וּמָחָר (“and sanctify them today and tomorrow” [v. 10]) in preparation for the lawgiving.

In that phase of G-d’s relationship with Israel the concept of sanctification and its application to law were construed in a general manner. This is clear from the Ten Commandments, the ordinances of Exodus 21–23 and the covenantal procedures in the chapter that follows. The only explicit call to holiness among those laws, “Be holy men to Me,” contains the following application: “Meat in the field torn by beasts you may not eat, cast it to the dogs” (22:30). At that early stage of lawgiving and the covenantal relationship holiness was not yet grounded in a comprehensive system of ritual that was designed to promote the sought-for disposition. Beyond fulfillment of the basic laws, the path to holiness had then largely been up to the people to more fully define and implement.

With construction of the Tabernacle a new phase in Israel’s relationship with G-d began and holiness took on a more inclusive nature. Termed *miqdash* at its inception, וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ (“And they shall make Me a holy shrine” [Exod. 25:8]), it was designed to be a center for holiness. A primary intention was that it would deepen the consciousness of G-d’s ongoing presence among the people, as He stated at the initiation of the project, “and I shall dwell in their midst” (v. 8). In a monumental pronouncement at the conclusion of instructions for Tabernacle construction and associated accoutrements, G-d more fully delineates His goals for the enterprise (29:43-46): He will “meet” with [the leaders of] Israel in the Tent of Meeting (providing ongoing prophetic

communication), and He will sanctify Tent and altar as well as Aaron and his sons to minister to Him. He will dwell within the nation and Israel’s consciousness of its relationship with Him will be greatly expanded.

The legislation of Leviticus, which immediately follows the account of Tabernacle construction and which issues forth strictly from the Tent of Meeting, is directed toward suffusing purity and holiness into the nation. It reaches its apex in Leviticus 19 with G-d’s explicit call to the Israelites to be holy. There, the “holiness code” is integrated with the covenantal relationship that had previously been established with the lawgiving and that had been symbolized by the Decalogue. Leviticus 19 accomplishes this through comprehensive application of the holiness principles to the Decalogue particulars. The synthesis fosters a heightened commitment to conscientious behavior and social justice that flows from awareness that G-d’s concerns extend to every facet of human interaction (see our study *Parashat Qedoshim and the Decalogue*). The new definition of holiness, expanded from the previous understanding of it by incorporating into it a thoroughgoing responsibility to man and society, was revolutionary in the thinking of the ancient world.

Before G-d introduced the Tabernacle, Moses had fulfilled several concluding covenant procedures (Exod. 24). G-d had then instructed him to ascend the mountain to receive the inscribed stone tablets. This accorded with contemporary protocol for completing a covenant, which called for a permanent copy of it to be placed in a sanctuary. The inscription would be the Decalogue, which represented the essence of the covenant. Tablets require an ark and an ark can be seen as requiring a shrine. Thus, instructions for the Tabernacle, in a way, constituted a continuation of the concluding covenantal procedures. With the Tabernacle comes the Leviticus legislation, adding it to the covenant stipulations. This is followed by the blessings and curses (Lev. 26), the finalization of a covenant in the ancient Near East. The overall

cohesive structure of Exodus–Leviticus is manifest (see our study *The G-d-Israel Covenant: On Meaning and Format*.)

It is clear that the Tabernacle and its attendant legislation were presented almost as “addenda” to the previous legislation. The two were separated with a number of covenantal procedures and the Tabernacle instructions were inserted just before covenant protocol was completed, so as to join them to the original legislation. One school of thought takes it that the chapters of the Tabernacle were commanded after the golden calf apostasy. However, in our *Parsashat Terumah Part I* study we found that the evidence to take the Tabernacle chapters in chronological order appears sound and it may very well be that G-d chose to present these laws to the Israelites in separate phases.

2. The Two-Verse Insertion

Parashat Tesavveh begins with a self-contained two-verse passage (Exod. 27:20-21) that prescribes details for the lampstand (menorah) service. Aaron and his sons will be responsible to kindle the lamps each evening in the outer sanctum of the Tent of Meeting (where the lampstand is located) with pure olive oil, such that they remain lit until morning. It is an everlasting statute to be brought from *bene yisrael*.

Instructions for the lampstand service at this point appear out of place, even perplexing. The prior passage concluded the instructions for Tabernacle construction while the passage following it directs Moses to summon Aaron and his sons to the priesthood and begins the description of their vestments. The rites of priestly induction will then be specified. Why should lampstand service (or any type of service) be interposed between these sections, especially before the priests had even been mentioned? And no other sanctuary service is here prescribed. Finally, the lampstand service that this passage details appears virtually verbatim in Leviticus (24:1-4)!

It has been suggested that after the lengthy section of instructions for Tabernacle construction the Torah provided a short passage concerning a priestly service to introduce the coming sections that were going to prescribe instructions concerning the priesthood. N. Leibowitz views this explanation as associated with

the widely accepted allegorical meanings of light. It is the appropriate location to express a symbol of hope that the sanctuary will be filled with “light” or that it will fulfill its function as a source of “light,” i.e., prophetic inspiration and enlightenment (Commentary on Leviticus, Heb. pps. 377-8). This may be *midrashic* enrichment, but surely it is not the straightforward intention of the passage.

However, the claim that the lampstand passage is to be seen as an introduction to the forthcoming section may be supported by the following consideration. At the beginning of instructions for the Tabernacle, its furnishings and associated items, a master list itemized the main materials that were required (Exod. 25:3-7). At the point at which the instructions for construction were completed (at the end of *Parashat Terumah*, that is, just where our lampstand passage appears), all the materials on that list had been cited for utilization up to but not including *שֶׁמֶן לְמִזְבֵּחַ* (“oil for the light”). That item, which was to be so distinctively associated with priestly service, may have been selected as a marker for the new section by insertion of the lampstand passage. The items that follow oil on the master list had also not been cited for utilization in the first section; like the oil, they are relevant to the service of the priesthood. Perhaps reflecting this explanation, “oil for the light,” the twelfth item enumerated on the master list, does not have a conjunctive *vav* at its beginning, in contrast to all the items that preceded it from the second on, indicating that it begins a new category.

The following adds an important consideration in explaining the presence of the lampstand service where it is.

Immediately after instructions concerning the priests – their vestments, induction and sanctification, as well as sanctification of the sacrificial altar – the Torah mandates the daily morning and afternoon priestly service of the *tamid* (the ongoing daily ‘*olah* sacrifice [29:38-42]). This is the final statute in the primary instructional section for establishment of the Tabernacle and is followed by several verses that comprise the conclusion of the larger instructional unit. Why was the *tamid* service singled out from the other sacrificial services and placed at this end point? Its details will be more fully elaborated in its expected location, together with the regulations for the other sacrifices, in the book of Numbers (Num. 28:1-8).

This question is similar to the one concerning the location of the lampstand passage at the beginning of the subsection.

It appears natural to understand the combination of the two daily priestly service laws of lampstand and *tamid* as comprising an opening and closing to the priestly segment of instructions, a subsection within the larger unit (see Oxford Bible Commentary). At that point the lampstand and the sacrificial altar were the only two sanctuary furnishings that were employed for daily priestly service, since the incense altar had not as yet been incorporated into the sanctuary program, a subject we will discuss in our next study.

3. Priestly Attire

The priestly vestments were termed “holy garments” (בגדי קֹדֶשׁ). This expression reflects the fact that they were to be worn only by the priest and exclusively when within the sanctuary precincts engaged in matters of holiness. They had to be treated accordingly.

The service apparel of the high priest had to betoken “dignity and majesty” (Exod. 28:2) as befits the senior officiant in the sanctuary. To a lesser extent this also applied to the garments of ordinary priests (v. 40). Surely an officiant’s dress, particularly that of the high priest, would affect the public’s level of respect for him as well as for the sanctuary and its program. Thus, many of the details were not left to the individual’s sense of propriety but spelled out. Undoubtedly, symbolism was incorporated into the design of the garments.

Accordingly, the high priest’s attire was elegant, exquisite and exceptional in design and appearance, in materials used and in embroidery and craftsmanship. It exuded an aura of royalty and preeminent rank, not inferior to that of a king. He was, after all, the supreme religious leader of the nation and it was to his authority that all the political leaders would have to submit. His raiment consisted of eight articles. As was the case with Tabernacle furnishings, the materials of which the various garments were composed seemingly reflected a hierarchy of importance. We will describe the eight articles of the high priest’s attire in the order in which they appear in the Exodus 28 instructions.

The *ephod* (a word that indicates binding, therefore wrapping around) was a tunic that was at least

partially wrapped around the body, perhaps as a type of robe but more probably as an apron. Two gemstones with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel engraved on them – six names on each stone – were affixed to its two shoulder bands. The Torah specifies that these are “remembrance stones for the Israelites” that the high priest carries on his shoulder bands “as a remembrance.” The spiritual leader must bear in mind that he must keep the concerns of the entire nation in mind and that he “reminds” the Deity of the situation of the entire nation. From scriptural attestations relating to Israel’s early history, including several instances in idolatrous contexts, it seems that the ephod was viewed as the preeminent priestly garment (Judg. 8:27; 17:5; 18:14; 1 Sam. 2:18, 28; 14:3; 22:18; 23:6).

Attached to the *ephod* was the *hoshen*, a breastpiece apparently woven as a square pouch one hand-span by one hand-span in size. The Torah specifies twelve diverse precious stones, arranged in four rows, to be set on its front side. Each stone was inscribed with the name of a tribe of Israel. Placed in the pouch were the *urim ve-tumim*, oracular items through which the high priest would ask G-d serious questions of national import that could not be answered by human authority (see Num. 27:21). The *hoshen*’s full name was *hoshen hamishpat*, the breastpiece of judgment or decision, reflecting its role in providing verdicts. Origin of the term *hoshen* is unknown. Since it countered the prohibited *nihush* (divining from omens, a practice generally related to superstition and idolatry), perhaps *hoshen* highlighted this monotheistic alternative through being an anagram.

Both *ephod* and *hoshen* were extremely colorful and highly ornamented. Both were made of the five types of materials used for the garments: gold (worked into threads), *tekhelet*, *argaman*, *tola’at shani* (wool dyed blue, purple and crimson respectively) and fine linen. These articles had to be made *ma’aseh hosheb* (“the product of skilled craftsmanship”), a requirement that included design and manufacture.

The third article was a full robe, the *me’il*, made of *tekhelet* (blue-dyed wool), that was worn beneath the *ephod*. It had elaborate ornamentation around its lower hem, consisting of pomegranate-shaped tassels composed of *tekhelet*, *argaman* and *tola’at shani*, interspersed with golden bells that would tinkle as the high priest would walk. The tinkling would be a

reminder to the high priest to focus on his responsibility, countering distraction. In addition, the bells would always signal his approach, particularly important upon entering the holy precinct as well as upon exiting (v. 35). An individual does not approach the king suddenly; hence, the high priest must not enter into a more proximate presence before Hashem in the state of mind equivalent to being unannounced. Neither should he leave without observing the appropriate protocol.

It should be borne in mind that the dyes necessary to produce the colored fabrics in this apparel – the blue and purple, which were derived from the murex snail, and the crimson (or red) derived from the eggs of a certain worm – were extremely costly, generally used only by nobility.

Fourth of the priestly articles was the golden frontlet, the *sis* (סִס). Engraved on it were the words “Holy to Hashem” (קֹדֶשׁ לַיהוָה [v. 36]). It was to be on the high priest’s forehead at all times “to achieve acceptance for them [the Israelites] before Hashem” (v. 38.) Elsewhere it is described as “the holy crown” (39:30; Lev. 8:9).

Scholars are unsure as to the meaning and derivation of the term *sis*, which in other contexts means “blossom” or “ornament.” Opinions range from considering the frontlet itself to be flower-shaped, to it having had a floral design engraved on it, to its name signifying it as an “adornment” of its wearer. However, *sis* also means to “look” or a nuance thereof. In Song of Songs 2:9, מִשְׁצִיחַ מִן הַחַלְנוֹת (“gazing through the windows”) is paralleled by מִצִּיץ מִן הַחַרְכִּים, which thus requires a translation such as that of the NJPS: “peering through the lattice.”

Rabbi S. D. Sassoon considered it most likely that the frontlet was called *sis* in accordance with the meaning of “getting a glimpse of.” The name reflected its function; it was to aid the high priest achieve his lofty purpose by prompting him to focus his vision on the higher world. The nature of such vision is not to be compared to standard seeing but to getting periodic glimpses of. We may more fully appreciate his interpretation when reflecting upon the following:

As spiritual leader of the nation, the high priest was required to remain focused on his responsibility at all times. He was expected on occasion to receive divinely inspired messages through the *urim ve-tumim*

(Num. 27:21). It appears natural that the function of the holy frontlet on his forehead was to assist him in concentrating his mental and spiritual energy such that he could glimpse the higher world of G-d’s will. Though not achieving the level of the prophet, he was to aspire to a level of divinely inspired vision through single-minded devotion to the state of sanctification. As the sages formulated קְדוּשָׁה מְבִיָּאָה לְיָדֵי רוּחַ הַקּוֹדֶשׁ (“Sanctity brings to the level of the holy spirit” [*b. ‘Abod. Zar.* 20b]).*

The *ketonet* was a full-body outfit that was worn on the flesh, made of fine linen and woven in checker-work fashion. It probably extended close to the ankles and may have had sleeves. A headwrap – the *misnefet* – was also made of fine linen. This article was mentioned in Ezekiel (Ezek. 21:31) as parallel to “crown.” Seventh of the articles was a sash – the *abnet* – that was wrapped around the waist. It was made from a mixture of the three dyed wool fabrics and fine linen. *Mikhnesayim* (breeches), “to cover the flesh of nakedness” (Exod. 28:42), completed the high priest’s eight garments.

The Mishnah ruled that sanctuary service was invalid without the full complement of dress (*m. Zebah.* 2:1).

Ordinary priests dressed in four basic garments: a *ketonet*, an *abnet*, a headdress – termed *migba‘at*, to be differentiated from the *misnefet* of the high priest – and *mikhnesayim*. The Torah also employs the term of “dignity and majesty” in conjunction with the apparel of the ordinary priest (Exod. 28:40), but the extent of its application is not clear. It may have been referring only to their headdress, the article immediately preceding the statement of “dignity and majesty” or it perhaps alludes to all the garments (except the breeches, which as undergarments were mentioned separately at the end for both the high priest and ordinary priests).

It should be noted that in those regions of ancient Near Eastern society where moderate weather prevailed, an average man did not generally wear more than a *ketonet*. Among the upper classes, however, a *ketonet* was at times embellished and served as a garment of distinction. Examples of this are the *ketonet passim* that Jacob made for Joseph (Gen. 37:3) and that Tamar wore as a princess (2 Sam. 13:18). In the latter case the text seems to describe it as attire that was interchangeable with the *me‘il*.

Shoes were not prescribed; priests served barefooted, as befits a holy place.

On the rare occasions that the high priest served in the inner sanctum, occasions generally limited to Yom Kippur, he wore only the four basic garments, made of plain linen. At such times the considerations of “dignity and majesty” are eclipsed by the pressing spiritual requirements of the day and a different set of thoughts and priorities takes precedence.

Several of the high priestly garments were made of a mixture of wool and linen, *sha’atnez*, a combination the Torah prohibited for regular clothing (Lev. 19:19; Deut. 22:11). Likewise, the fabrics of the Tabernacle curtains (Exod. 26:1) and of the *parokhet* divider (v. 31) were composed of this mixture. Also in the case of *sisit* (the fringes that were affixed to four-cornered garments that Israelite men wore), *sha’atnez* was permitted (biblically). Some have suggested that the reason for the prohibition of *sha’atnez* is because that combination was associated with the high priest and the sanctuary, i.e., with holiness, and its status should not be diminished by use in ordinary garments. As regards *sisit*, however, because that law was intended to link its *tekhelet* fringes to the holy sphere it was specifically permitted.*

4. Details and Repetitions

Torah legislation concerning the Tabernacle and its program is extremely detailed. One reason for this is surely associated with the fact that many features of Tabernacle construction and the regulations concerning its basic functioning were, in a general way, similar to those of the religions of the region. Consequently, the Torah made a number of subtle modifications in accordance with its monotheistic objectives to exclude the inclusion of pagan symbolism as well as particulars that may have been on the “slippery slope.” Attention to minutia thus took on great importance.

Nevertheless, from an informational point of view, it appears to have been unnecessary to detail as many individual steps in the process of Tabernacle construction, and superfluous to repeat the major furnishings as often as was done. Such repetition undoubtedly reflects the importance placed on acknowledging and appreciating the enormous role the Tabernacle was to serve in the nation’s life. It is so

precious that every aspect of it should be savored, all particulars, every step of the way, should be recounted with joy. There should not be any rushing through details with a summary phrase or with the equivalent of an etcetera, as acceptable as that might be concerning other Torah subjects.

A similar consideration applies to other facets of the Tabernacle’s dedication. In Numbers 7, regarding the altar initiation ceremony, the twelve chieftains’ offerings are each fully detailed, even though the contents of each are identical. We are to appreciate and enjoy the majestic occasion, the dignity, amity and equality of all the tribes in front of the sanctuary. This principle also applies to the priestly installation details of Leviticus 8.

Specifically, throughout the entire account of all aspects of the Tabernacle’s construction (Exod. 25–40) there are eight itemized enumerations of the major furnishings. Individual mention is made of these items in conjunction with each of the following steps:

1. G-d’s instructions for construction (25–30)
2. His instructions regarding anointing sanctuary and furnishings (30:26 ff.)
3. His identifying who shall be the chief artisans (31:1 ff.)
4. Moses’ transmittal of instructions to the people (35:4 ff.)
5. Construction (36:8 ff.)
6. Presenting the finished product to Moses (39:33 ff.)
7. G-d’s instructions to assemble the Tabernacle (40:1 ff.)
8. Assembly (40:17 ff.)

There is only one case of a reference to the major furnishings in which they are not individually detailed but referred to using a general phrase (in the case of G-d’s instructions to carry out the anointing in 40:9). Of course one assumes that there is a reason why one instance was treated differently from the other eight. In accordance with the covenantal symbolism of the number eight with which the Tabernacle account is replete – a matter we will touch upon in coming studies – one may conjecture that perhaps this singular exception was to highlight the eight itemizations, reflecting linkage with the covenant.

Endnote

* We will discuss the connection between *sisit* and *sis* in our study on *Parashat Shelah-Lekha Part III*.

©2010 Sephardic Institute