

Weekly Words of Torah

A True Accounting Needs Specificity: Parshat Pekudei

Framing

Parshat Pekudei may appear at first to be rather opaque and technical. It describes in great detail the assembly of the Mishkan (Tabernacle), with a long discourse about the priestly attire. Yet there is a profound human dimension as well, if we stop to appreciate the rationale for sharing all of these details. The parsha deals with finite financial amounts, but we ought to consider how we can apply some of its approach to reckoning with the infinitely large hole that the hostages' absence in our lives has left for all of Am Yisrael.

Access Points

■ Our parsha derives its name from the opening words of Exodus 38:24: *eileh f'qudei hamishkan* – these are the accounts of the Mishkan. The focus, then, of our portion, is every single financial transaction, with all of its details, that went into the crafting of the Mishkan. These accounts take up the bulk of the parsha, as we learn the provenance, value, and specifications of each constituent component of the Mishkan. But what's particularly odd is that the same root *p-q-d* is used just a couple of words later in the same verse in a seeming redundancy, telling us that these were the accounts *asher puqqad al-pi Moshe* – that were accounted (or perhaps calculated) by Moses. Moshe Rabbeinu himself spent all this time accounting for every part of the Mishkan; clearly it was valued quite highly and deserved such an intricate calculation. But our present dilemma is even more complex, as we are confronted with a situation, a loss, that is literally incalculable. Our parsha paints a clear picture of how challenging it was to figure out the exact worth of the Mishkan, but what are we to do when it is simply impossible to calculate the inestimable loss from our lives of over a hundred hostages? Our tradition teaches unambiguously that one life is worth a whole world (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5) - an infinitesimally large amount. Given what we know about accounting for the Mishkan, *gal vahomer*, all the more so, must we hold front of mind and reckon with a tragedy that is truly unaccountable.

■ From the currency conversions/weights to the entire priestly wardrobe to the specifications of the physical construction of the Mishkan, it is evident that we have a parsha that is concerned with the details. Witness how Exodus 39:33 narrates a seemingly simple event: *vayyaviyu et hamishkan el Moshe* – then they brought the Mishkan to Moses. We already know from our preceding chapters what the Mishkan consisted of and even looked like, but it turns out that this clause is actually just the header for the highly detailed list that follows! We read another eight and a half verses that go out of their way to enumerate every physical component that we mean when we say “the Mishkan.” It is insufficient for a reader to conceptualize the Mishkan in the abstract; rather we are instructed to understand what it looks, sounds, and feels like at a deeper level. Similarly, we must refuse to let the 130 remaining hostages exist only in theory, as an abstract tragedy. We ought to characterize our loss in more concrete terms and make a point to get to know the remaining hostages more intimately. What do they like? How do they spend their time? We can push ourselves to uncover some of these biographical details and ensure that our immense loss is neither abstract nor a mere number. Let us mimic the parsha in not only referencing “the hostages” in passing, but rather leaving no detail up to imagination in crafting a vivid picture of what each of these sacred souls brings to the world.

■ Our parsha goes into elaborate detail about not only the worth of various items in the Mishkan, but also the aesthetic details. Most of Chapter 39 is devoted to depicting for our mind's eye a clear visual of the priestly attire. And Exodus 39:10-14 even paints a precise picture of every single stone on each row of the priestly breastplate. There is clearly a great significance ascribed to the visual effect of how kohanim were dressed. Our rather artistically attuned portion hints at *hiddur mitzvah*, the notion that Jewish spaces and objects should look beautiful. We can draw a couple of takeaways. First, it has been moving to hear hostage families speak about the innumerable ways that their loved ones, now in captivity, beautified their lives. It is worth sharing these with our communities and understanding that people are just as likely, if not more, to bring beauty into our midst as are objects. Next, in the spirit of recognizing the value of art, consider engaging this week with the vast array of artistic projects that have emerged in connection with the hostages. There have been poems aplenty, and Kikar Chatufim (Hostages Square) in Tel Aviv has become a significant multimedia exhibit of hostage-connected art. Use our parsha's concern for the aesthetic and artistic to highlight these artistic remembrances of what we've lost.

Call to Action

Learn more about and appreciate art connected to the hostages and their families on the [Hostages and Missing Families Forum website](#). In the political realm, as an increasing number of American elected officials and institutions make statements calling for a ceasefire, insist that any such demand for a cessation of hostilities must include a call for a negotiated hostage release. Draw explicitly on our above framework of each individual hostage alone holding legitimately inestimable value.

Closing Intention

The parallel concerns for matters both abstract and concrete is a key feature of our parsha. Our appreciation for the idea of the Mishkan is enhanced by the parsha's concretization of all of its parts and its clear, exact spelling out of all the Mishkan consisted of. Similarly, our understanding of the priesthood is strengthened by the depth of visual detail offered in describing the priestly look. Let us then speak not only philosophically, but also in tangible terms about our hostages. We must go beyond the numbers, ages, and names to acquaint ourselves with a high degree of specificity with the details of those whose return we so desperately yearn and fight for.