

PARASHAS PIKUDEI

A Time to Wait

What happens when a construction project is finished right on time or even somewhat ahead of schedule? Is it immediately put into use so that it can begin serving the needs of the owner or earning him revenue? Or is it allowed to remain empty for a while? These questions are really rhetorical. No one would dream of leaving a major construction project idle for even the shortest time after completion. He would want an immediate return on his heavy investment.

And yet, this is not what happened when the Jewish people constructed the Mishkan. It was a magnificent edifice, agleam with cedar wood, aglitter with gold and aglow with opulent hangings. The fixtures and utensils were all made of gold and copper and exquisitely designed. This structure, standing as a glittering crown jewel at the center of the Jewish encampment, would be the dwelling place of the Divine Presence, the royal abode of the King of Kings.

The work on the Mishkan began right after Yom Kippur, the day Moses came down from the mountain for the second time. Three months later, the elements were complete. The beams had been carved and gilded, the hanging fully woven, the fixtures and utensils crafted. All that remained to be done was to bring all the elements together and erect the Mishkan. Yet for some reason, God did not instruct Moses to erect the Mishkan until the month of Nissan, three months after all the elements were completed. What was the reason for this delay in making the Mishkan operational?

The commentators explain that the Mishkan was to serve as atonement for the sin of the Jewish people in making the Golden Calf. What led to this terrible sin? How could the Jewish people worship the Golden Calf so soon after the spectacular revelation of the Divine Presence on Mount Sinai?

It was impatience. After the Ten Commandments were pronounced on Mount Sinai, Moses went up on the mountain for forty days to receive the rest of the Torah. Because of a miscalculation, the people awaited him expectantly one day earlier than he was supposed to return. When he did not appear, they despaired of his ever returning, and they built the Golden Calf. Couldn't they wait just one more day, as Aaron begged them to do? What was the rush? It was just impatience and impulsiveness. They got an idea into their heads and had to act immediately.

The inauguration of the Mishkan was, therefore, used to emphasize the importance of patience to the Jewish people. Just because the elements were finished did not mean that the final erection had to begin immediately. The work of construction was finished. Now there would be a time of reflection, a time to review the errors of impulse and insufficient faith that led to the Golden Calf and correct them, a time to contemplate patiently the virtues of patience.

A sage was contemplating the ebb and flow of the surf in a seaside resort when an acquaintance greeted him. The man seemed to be in a rush.

“Where are you going in such a great hurry?” asked the sage.

“I have allowed myself only two weeks for this journey, and my itinerary is crowded. I’ve already been to three castles, four islands and seven towns. And there is still so much to see.”

“Ah, and what do you remember of these places?” asked the sage. “What did you think of them?”

“I don’t remember so much, and I really did not think into them so deeply. I just looked. But everything was nice.”

“You are cheating yourself, my friend,” said the sage. “If you had the patience to stop and think, you might learn something and enrich yourself.”

In our own lives, contemporary society has conditioned us to be in a constant rush. The benefits of modern technology are great indeed, but they have taught us to expect instant results and instant responses. We have gone way beyond the fax machine. Today, it is email, instant messaging, high bandwidth Internet access, real time streaming media, universal access to global communications. We operate at such high speeds that we have no time to reflect on what we are doing. We live in an impatient world, but we do not have to become impatient people. If we step on the brakes every once in a while and take stock of what we are doing and where we are going, we can reap not only the benefits of technology but also the benefits of patience, wisdom and a deeper enjoyment of life.