Terumah: Shemot (Exodus)

What's it all about?

The Israelites are commanded to contribute thirteen precious materials **to build the Mishkan, God's temporary earthly dwelling place.** Moses, still on Mount Sinai, receives detailed instructions on how to build the Mishkan so that it may be easily disassembled, transported, and rebuilt as the people continue their journey in the wilderness.



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"“They must make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst”"

Take a deeper dive

Last week's parsha, Parashat Mishpatim, was a watershed moment: After the awe-inspiring plagues, after the miraculous moment of splitting the sea, after the pinnacle that is receiving the Torah on Sinai, HaShem steps back. He has given us a lot. And now, it is our turn to give back, to obey His commandments and, by obeying, become His partners in reshaping the world.

Last week, then, we received 53 different mitzvot pertaining to many facets of human life. **This week, we receive … instructions on building the Mishkan, or God's earthly dwelling place.**

Which, if you think about it, is STRANGE. Our parsha marks the beginning of a big chunk of the Torah dedicated to the Mishkan. How big? In the Book of Genesis, the Torah dedicates 31 verses to the creation of the entire world; the Mishkan, on the other hand, receives 450 verses, which is even more astonishing considering the fact that it was always supposed to be a *temporary* dwelling, here only until we enter the Promised Land and build the Temple.

Why, then, is it so prominent?

The great Torah teacher and scholar, Professor Nechama Leibowitz, gave us a clue. "The main point isn't how the world was created," she wrote, "but what mankind chooses to do with it."

Our parsha, then, is a blueprint for world-building. And if it can be reduced to one simple slogan, it's this: get busy.

This is why our parsha is very intricately detailed, telling us precisely which materials to use and what the dimensions of the Mishkan ought to be and feeling, at times, less like Scripture and more like an Ikea catalogue. And that's precisely the point: What we see here is the first known iteration of what social scientists have called the Ikea Effect, a cognitive bias that makes us value something more if we feel like we put it together. It's why, as studies show, people who sell their used Ikea furniture online tend to price them higher than comparable items—they feel that by putting them together they created more value. This isn't hard to understand: we have a need to feel competent and useful.

Which, the Torah teaches us, can only happen if we're busy. Sefer HaHinuch, the Thirteenth Century manual instructing children in the logic and purpose of the mitzvot, put it neatly: **The heart follows the action. We get attached to whatever it is that we do.** Which is why the great Hassidic master, the Kotzker Rebbe, once famously quipped that he didn't want his Hassidim to not sin because they were too righteous; he wanted them not to sin because they were too busy. The lesson, then, couldn't be more simple: Want a better, holier, more perfect world? Just do it.

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