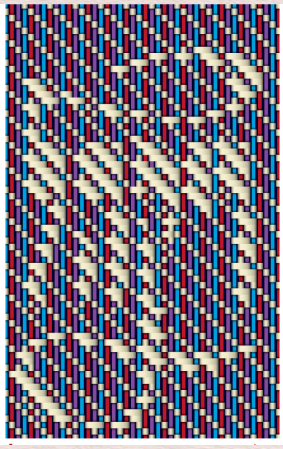
Vayakhel: Shemot (Exodus)

What's it all about?

Moses assembles the Israelites and reiterates the commandment to observe Shabbat. Then, he conveys God's instructions for the building of the Mishkan, God's temporary earthly residence. The people donate fine materials generously, so much so that Moses has to instruct them to stop giving. A team of wise-hearted artists then builds the Mishkan and its furnishings, closely following the divine blueprint.



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"The people's work of contributing sufficed for all the work that had to be done, and even to have a surplus."

Take a deeper dive

This week's parsha begins with a dramatic question that, more dramatically still, is never asked out loud: How do you bounce back from catastrophe? Last week, we read about the Golden Calf, perhaps the most grievous sin in our nation's history. How do you bounce back from such a collective disaster?

The parsha's very first verse gives us a good idea of what's to come. "Moses," it reads, "called the whole community of the children of Israel to assemble, and he said to them: 'These are the things that the Lord commanded to make.'"

The theme of this week's parsha, in other words, is congregation and community, and the ways in which we can—and must—come together to survive and thrive.

But our coming together, the parsha teaches us, is different than everyone else's. Other societies are formed primarily for the sake of individual protection and convenience; they're social contracts designed first and foremost to guarantee that their members could thrive alone as individuals. Jews think differently—our society is predicated on our ability to pull off this moment of vayakhel, of congregating as one.

This, the 16th Century Greek Rabbi Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz taught us, is why every Jew is only commanded to bring half a shekel towards building the Mishkan, God's temporary dwelling on earth, and not a whole shekel. Because every Jew alone is only half a person, made complete only when holding hands and standing shoulder to shoulder with other Jews.

The idea of this week's parsha, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook explained, is to show us the power of drawing closer to our fellow Jews, which, in turn, brings us closer to God.

How, precisely, do we go about doing that? The parsha explores a fascinating idea: through art.

Art, the parsha teaches us, isn't an afterthought; it's a major vehicle for uncovering our deepest spiritual connections, yearnings, and insights, the way we learn to see the truth and beauty of God's creation. This is why the artisans building the Mishkan had to be "wise-hearted"—theirs was a spiritual task, a task of enchanting the world.

Rav Kook understood this well. "When I lived in London," he recalled, "I used to visit the National Gallery, and my favourite pictures were those of Rembrandt. I really think that Rembrandt was a tzaddik. Do you know that when I first saw Rembrandt's works, they reminded me of the rabbinic statement about the creation of light? We are told that when God created light [on the first day of Creation, as opposed to the natural light of the sun on the fourth day], it was so strong and pellucid that one could see from one end of the world to the other, but God was afraid that the wicked might abuse it. What did He do? He reserved that light for the righteous in the World to Come. But now and then there are great men who are blessed and privileged to see it. I think that Rembrandt was one of them, and the light in his pictures is the very light that God created on Genesis day."

Our only conduit to the sort of transcendence only HaShem is capable of in creation is creating something of our own, or admiring the beauty that we can see and comprehend and which elevates our hearts and our souls.

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