

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

Vayechel-Pikudei HaChodesh 21 “Renewal”

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat shalom. This week’s parsha is personally memorable for me, because in 2006, fifteen years ago this week, I led my first Shabbat service in Philadelphia. You could call it my “proba Shabbos”, the occasion for congregants to see if they want you as their rabbi. Thank God it went well, and I guess the rest is history.

This brings to mind some feelings of uncertainty for our shul and community. Due to the pandemic, shuls across the country, especially in large urban settings, have been forced to grapple with insecurity about their future. In a way, as our pre-pandemic activities are beginning to reopen, it does seem that Mekor, like many other shuls, must start all over again, so to speak, without a clear roadmap. I urge everyone to stay strong with us as more people in our community become vaccinated and life slowly normalizes.

When I think back to my first d’var Torah in Philly, there is one element of that talk that I find as fitting to our current situation as it was then. This parsha reiterates all the details about **building** the mishkan, the same information that was already provided in Terumah and Tetzaveh,

which cover the time when we were commanded to build it. Moreover, following each completed task, no less than 17 times, our parsha declares that the directions were carried out *kaasher tziva hashem et moshe, precisely as God had commanded Moshe*. Many commentators ask, why not just say that *everything was done as God instructed Moshe* just one time and omit all of the construction details, since we already had the details spelled out in Teruma and Tetzaveh when the project was in the planning phases? In pre-Covid times, during my sermon I joked that if the Parsha took that shortcut, we'd be eating cholent by now. Of course, we don't have cholent at kiddush yet, and our current service is already abbreviated somewhat, but it would be even shorter if we eliminated all those repetitious verses.

I think the answer lies in the extra parsha we read this week -- HaChodesh, which celebrates the month of Nisan, declared the first month of the year. It's like a double Rosh Chodesh – it's the head month of the year and like every other Rosh Chodesh, is the head of the month. The word in Hebrew for month, *chodesh*, is associated with the concept of *chadash, newness*, and is spelled the same way.

So, when analyzing the transition from Purim to Pesach on our calendar, we find that Purim, which falls in the last month of the year, celebrates a redemption that is shadowed by the dark and complex issues of exile. In contrast, we get a fresh start in the new year and new month with our celebration of Pesach, which falls in the spring, when life is renewed, and commemorates a redemption that was more clear-cut. I think the juxtaposition of these two holidays is a reminder that the only way to avoid sinking into cynicism is to take a message from the month of Nisan, which is to look upon each day as a fresh start, as we recite in the morning prayer service, *mechadesh bituvo bechol yom tamid maaseh breisheet*, God renews Creation every day, giving us a brand-new opportunity, allowing us to leave the past behind.

I think that's the message of the detailed and repetitious mishkan verses as well. I've heard many complaints about how boring those sections are and how it would be preferable to skip them. But if you learn Torah with the perspective it deserves, you realize every part has a special meaning for each individual. As the Talmud says, *shivim panim l'torah there are 70 facets to the Torah*, which correspond to the *shivim l'shonot, the 70 languages of the world*.

If you care enough to look closely, you'll discover that every facet of life is captured in every part of the Torah, even in the so-called boring sections.

Ultimately, that's the message of Pesach – each day is chadash, a renewal, and with that insight, we can release the shackles of the past.

Right now, we're in a significant phase of renewal in our daily lives: the vaccine is giving hope to everyone, and the warmth and beauty of spring has arrived. With the building of the Mishkan, I think this Shabbat is teaching us that we should not limit our attention to those secular aspects of renewal. We should **also** apply our positive outlook to the Torah and our shul, and remember that they need to be the true center of our existence. As the world reopens, let us remain steadfast in devotion to our community, because God and Torah will always be the ultimate source of meaning in our lives. Shabbat shalom.