

From the Ohr HaChayim

by Jacob Solomon

They shall make a Sanctuary for Me, so that I may dwell among them. As everything that I show you, the form of the Mishkan and the form of all its vessels; so you shall do. (25:8-9)

The directives for building the Mishkan detailed in this parsha puts the construction of the Aron (Ark), Shulchan (Table), and Menora first, and afterwards the making of the Mishkan itself. However, Parshat Vayahkel implies that master-constructor Betzalel reversed the order: he built the Mishkan first, and only afterwards the items that were to go inside. This not only raises the question of why Betzalel changed the order, but also why the Torah nevertheless reports that "Betzalel... did everything that G-d commanded Moshe" (38:22).

Rashi explains that Betzalel reversed the order through the use of simple logic: first erect the building, and then work on its contents. Not the other way round. And Moshe agreed with him: effectively saying that it was the order that G-d intended all the way along (Rashi to 38:22), probably implying that the Ark was detailed first only because of its primary importance.

The Ohr HaChayim, however, finds the order for the construction unclear.

One possible reading of the psukim is that the Mishkan comes first: "You shall make a Sanctuary for me... As everything that I show you, the form of the Mishkan and the form of all its vessels; so you shall do." First the Mishkan, then the vessels. The Torah immediately proceeds with the vessels one by one and at length, possibly to emphasize their additional kedusha.

A second interpretation is that vessels were commanded first. "The form of the Mishkan" is placed before "the form of all its vessels" for a different reason. It was not the order of construction. It was a response to an over-arching problem that Moshe had with the directive "You shall make Me a Sanctuary so that I may dwell among them." According to the Midrash (Psikta Rabati 15), Moshe panicked, wondering: "How is it possible that G-d who is Infinite may accommodate Himself in a humanly-built structure?" G-d effectively replied: "Just do what I tell you. I will show you the structure of the Sanctuary as I want it. Make it from a series of upstanding boards, and My Presence within and among the Israelites will be as intense as the last time I dwelt in their midst: at the Revelation on Mount Sinai".

Moshe initially followed the second interpretation; the vessels were to be made first. However, Betzalel used

the logic of first interpretation: the Mishkan, and only then the contents. Thus the vessels, which had an even greater kedusha than the Mishkan, would have a suitable environment ready for them as soon as they were constructed. Moshe thus agreed with Betzalel's having worked according to the first interpretation: "Betzalel did everything as G-d commanded Moshe", means "Betzalel had indeed done everything as G-d commanded Moshe". And as Rashi explains, Moshe was so pleased with Betzalel's interpretation that he linked it with his name: Betzal-el meaning "in the shade of G-d".

Underlying the different interpretations of the two readings could be a fundamental issue. The second interpretation was the simpler of the two, the first introduced an additional degree of sophistication which Betzalel contributed. "They shall make a Sanctuary for Me, so that I may dwell among them. As everything that I show you, the form of the Mishkan and the form of all its vessels; so you shall do" now had two meanings, not one. The first was G-d's reassurance that Moshe and the Israelites would be able to build a suitable structure to house the Shechina even though it was infinite: He would give the directives so that all would be effective. The second meaning was contained in the very same words: first the Mishkan, then

the vessels.

And at the end, Moshe fully endorsed all aspects of the work: "Moshe saw the entire work and behold! They had done it as G-d commanded. And Moshe blessed them" (39:43). Like the later incident with Aharon where "Moshe listened, and it was good in his eyes" (Vayikra 10:20), he was not ashamed to change his mind when presented with a superior line of reasoning. 