

## **Pekudai drash Exodus 38:21- 40:38**

March 29, 2025 - Lucy Steinitz

To start I want to thank Michael Strassfeld's weekly Torah commentary, although I'll be taking my thoughts in a different direction.

In this Torah portion, Pekudei brings the building of the sanctuary to a successful conclusion. It is also the end of the Book of Exodus. This is relevant in an interesting way. Currently, everything in our world seems headed for "unbuilding" and collapse. Yet Pesah is coming with its call to remember that redemption happened once and so can happen again.

So, allow me to begin by summarizing this whole parasha. Pekudai means "amounts of" and mostly this refers in excruciating detail to the large amount of precious metals and embossed decorations donated by the Israelites to lavishly adorn the Mishkan and the priestly garments. The specifications were communicated to Moses in last week's parasha, but we get a heavy dose of this again. Finally, the Mishkan is completed and all its components are brought to Moses, who anoints it with the holy oil, and initiates Aaron and his four sons into the priesthood. Then a cloud appears over the Mishkan, signifying the Divine Presence that has come to dwell within it.

When I first read this in preparation for today's drash, I thought that it is really hard to find some modern relevance to any of this. But now I think that is precisely the point.

The Mishkan and the garments are a very public, showy display of the Israelites' religion as it was evolving across the desert. No longer are we berating the Israelites for building a golden calf; this time they are using their precious metals and garments to build something that is acceptable to God

and becomes central to Jewish life and prayer. It's fancy and its beautiful by the standards of the day – though you do have to wonder how these former slaves owned all this this precious gold and silver and copper in the first place.

But the main point I'm making is that **this is a public display**, around which all the Israelites could rally. Everyone had to donate heavily – all their precious jewels and treasures -- to make this happen. To any non-Israelite neighbors, this display of status and wealth expressed pride and -- at long last -- a sense of unity

After the destruction of the Temple, however, we lost the singular focus or structure with which to represent our unity, our presence and our faith. Increasingly, our people were relegated to smaller houses of workshop. Thus, over time, the synagogue became our public display. And depending on our level of security in the places our people inhabited, the synagogues were either small and even hidden in caves (like I saw in parts of Ethiopia), or else much large, even grandiose edifices – for example in parts of Europe and in this country. The fancier buildings, in particular, told the world: We are here. We have survived, we stand tall, and we are free, We are equal to the best of any other faith or and other house of worship.

It wasn't just the buildings. Back in the day when we grew up, most of our synagogue rabbis also adorned themselves in special garments – elegant, if not fancy -- and some still do. . Not quite priests, but a titch reminiscent in some of the robes and hats.

But not Fabrangen. We represent the antithesis. We have rejected all of that – in many ways the opposite of what we are reading about in the parsha and

what our own experiences were like for many as children in a so-called “traditional” synagogue.

Why this juxtaposition – so radical and extreme? And does this still hold the same meaning to us now, as it did 50 years ago, when Fabringen was first founded?

In other words, why is it that most Jews who go to synagogue dress upon Shabbat morning while we come to Fabringen informally, sometimes in jeans and tee-shirts and other everyday clothes? The mishkan and the priests in this parasha are all beautifully decked out in gorgeous fabric and precious metals... a mishkan of such great value that the Divine Presence has chosen to dwell inside it.

But look at what we have chosen, as our symbolic tabernacle or Aron Kodesh. Yes, we have beautiful, handmade coverings and some ritual objects, often made with love and care by members of our own community (I don't want to diminish these at all). And we have more objects of art and even a portable Aharon Kodesh, though they are only seen on High Holidays. So the issues, is, do think that our style and selection is sufficiently reminiscent and respectful of the Mishkan of yesteryear?

The beauty of the priestly garments and of the tabernacle that we read about in P'dukai were a sign of pride, respect and unity -- and God rewarded the ancient Israelites for their material sacrifice by coming to dwell inside the mishkan.

By contrast, the adornments of this parsha don't seem relevant to us any more, at least not at Fabringen. We are happy NOT to get dressed up, not to pay to a separate Building Drive, and not to have any paid clergy – much as we

are appreciate having clergy as Fabrangen members, taking their turn as volunteers along with everyone else.

The way we have chosen to express our Jewish identity, and to worship, and to form a community are the direct antitheses to this Parasha. We are rejecting material finery, objects of luxury, and the sacrifice of precious jewels and other treasures.

But is this only true for us in our Jewish lives, when it comes to Fabrangen – not necessarily how we live our lives outside (or beyond) this community? To the extent each one of us can afford it, don't we like nice decorations in our home, perhaps owning attractive jewelry? And please let's keep our dues down, or at least flexible, so no one has to feel an economic pinch to belong. What are we trying to say, 50 years after hippie-dom, 50 years after we were all pretty broke graduate students or just starting our careers, 50 years after the world has changed and our lives have changed in just about every other way? I'm not arguing that it should be different – I also like the status quo here at Fabrangen. – but I am curious. IS OUR STYLE STILL RELEVANT to where we are as Jews, as a community, and to our current context?

Synagogues came into being as a way to replicate much of Temple worship around the world, when we could no longer depend on one mishkan or one temple. But have we at Fabrangen gone too far, thrown the proverbial baby out with the bathwater? Could it be said that we are actually being disrespectful now, because we have invested so much into other aspects of our personal lives but still insist on a decorated picnic table and informal, everyday clothes and sandals for our house of worship?

I don't have any opinion about this, but the contrast struck me so powerfully when I read Pekudai. And so I'm wondering, and this is my first question:

what do you make of this extreme difference? By contrast, as we are aging, would you prefer a little more decorum, decoration, and visual finery? And, secondly, now that looking back and also forward as Fabringen, is this worthy of a discussion in relation to our future planning as a community?