

TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Bamidbar

May 15, 2021, 4 Sivvan 5781

Torah: Numbers 1:1-4:20; Triennial 2:1-3:13

Haftarah: Hosea 2:1-22

The Anesthetized Mishkan

Ilana Kurshan

Parashat Bamidbar describes the various responsibilities incumbent upon each of the three branches of the Levite clan, who transported the Tabernacle every time the Israelites broke camp and traveled. The sons of Gershon carried the curtains, the sons of Merari carried the frame, and the sons of Kehat – who are the subject of the fourth chapter of the book of Numbers – carried the sacred objects inside the Tabernacle, including the bowls, ladles, jars, and libation jugs. The parashah ends on an ominous note – in the very last verse, we are told that if any of the sons of Kehat were to witness the dismantling of the Sanctuary or look upon the sacred objects, they would die (4:20). Why may the sons of Kehat carry these objects but not view them? What is the problem with looking at these objects, and why does the Torah warn so sternly against it? The various metaphors used

throughout the Talmud to describe the Mishkan offer insight into a possible reason behind this injunction – one that has much to teach us about the way we bear the weight of the sacred in our lives.

Our parashah teaches that while the sons of Kehat transported the sacred objects, they could only do so once those objects were properly covered by Aaron and his sons, the priests. Each time the Israelites prepared to travel, the priests would enter the Tabernacle and spread a blue cloth over the Menorah, fire pans, oil vessels, altar, and service vessels, before placing them in a covering of dolphin skins. “Only then shall the Kehatites come in and lift them, so that they do not come in contact with the sacred objects and die” (4:15). There was no problem with looking at these vessels while the Israelites were encamped and the Mishkan was operational. But once the vessels were no longer used for their sacred function and became objects to be transported, they had to be covered and concealed.

The talmudic discussion of the transport of the Mishkan appears in tractate Shabbat, since the laws governing the labors prohibited on Shabbat are derived from labors related to the Mishkan. It is in this context that Rabbi Yishmael comments that the Mishkan, which was covered in curtains that overhung its frame, resembled “a woman walking in the marketplace with her skirts trailing after her” (Shabbat 98b). The Mishkan was like a modest woman draped in layers of clothing. To transport the Mishkan or its vessels without their coverings, then, would be a violation akin to exposing a woman’s body in public.

And indeed, as the Talmud in tractate Yoma (54b) relates, this is exactly what the Romans did when they desecrated the Temple. The Talmud teaches that when the gentiles entered the sanctuary to destroy the Temple, they saw the golden cherubs—the Keruvim—which sat atop the Ark of the Covenant and hauled them out to the marketplace. The Talmud describes that “they immediately debased them, as it is stated, ‘All who honored her debased her because they have seen her nakedness’” (Lamentations 1:8). The Romans brought the naked, uncovered cherubs into the marketplace, where they were no longer part of the divinely-ordained architecture of the Mishkan and became objectified commodities. Removed from the sacred enclosure of the Tabernacle, the naked cherubs became objects of mockery and scorn.

And so it seems that the purpose of covering these vessels was to ensure that they, like the cherubs, were not desacralized. We might think of the transported Mishkan like a body on the operating table. When not being operated upon, that body is a living, breathing human being pulsing with life, teeming with ideas and energy and emotion. But when the patient has been anesthetized and the body lies inert, the surgeon is presumably focused not on the whole person, but on where to make an incision, and how deep to cut. By covering the body parts that are not being operated on, it is easier for the surgeon to detach the body part from the person to whom that body belongs, and thereby focus on the surgery. Seeing an abdomen as a small square of flesh is much less distracting than seeing the abdomen in the context of the larger body. By dehumanizing in order to operate, the surgeon ironically maintains the sanctity of the human body in its entirety.

So too, by covering the Mishkan when its parts are dismantled, we preserve the sanctity of the whole. When the Israelites were encamped and the Mishkan was up and running, it was pulsing with the sacred rhythm of the sacrificial rites, and no one would think to treat it with disrespect. But once the Mishkan was transported, it was easy to view it merely as an object to be lifted and lugged. There was a danger that its vessels would be regarded as heavy loads, not holy lamps and lavers. It was therefore essential that those who dismantle the Mishkan know how to treat it with proper respect, laying covers on all the sacred vessels so that not everyone could gaze upon them. The Mishkan must never be reduced to a burden, just like a patient ought never be reduced to a body.

T.S. Eliot was surely not describing the Mishkan in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and yet his imagery is all too apt:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table...

When it was time to go—when the Israelites were on the move, guided by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire spread out against the evening sky—the Mishkan vessels became inert objects, like a patient etherized on the table. Anyone who objectified or commodified these vessels was violating the sacred, an act deserving of death. As our parashah reminds us, there is a time for revelation and a time for concealment. May we learn to discern when to reveal and when to conceal as we journey through life and shoulder our burdens.

An Army of Individuals? **Vered Hollander-Goldfarb**

Text: Bamidbar 1:1-18

1The LORD spoke to Moshe... **2**"Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families, according to the number by names, every male... **3**You and Aaron are to count... all the men in Israel who are twenty years old or more and able to serve in the army... **18**And they assembled all the congregation on the first day of the second month, and they declared their pedigrees after their families...

- What do you think is the purpose of the census at this point?
- Why do you think that the Torah dedicates a long chapter for the census? It could have merely given the final number!
- What is the significance of counting individuals by Moshe and Aaron rather than just having the tribe leader deliver their total number?

Commentary: Ramban Bamidbar 1:45

1)... I have not understood the reason for this commandment [that they should ascertain the number of the people]. ... Perhaps it was to proclaim His kindness over them, for it was with [only] seventy persons that their

forefathers went down into Egypt, and now they were as the sand of the sea...

2) Furthermore, he who comes before the father of the prophets (Moshe), and his brother (Aaron) the holy one of the LORD, and becomes known to them by name, receives a merit... And in Bamidbar Sinai Rabbah I have seen the following text: ... The Holy One, blessed be He, told Moshe to count them with respect and greatness to each one. [Thus He said]: You shall not say to the head of the family: 'How many people are there in your family?'... but they are each to pass before you with awe and in respect, and you shall count them. — It is with reference to this that it is written, "according to the number by names."

3) It is also possible to say that [the reason] was similar to the practice of governments before fighting a war, since they were now ready to enter into the land and to fight... and also so that he should distribute the land to them according to their numbers, ... since if not for the affair of the spies, they would have entered the land immediately.

- Ramban offers 3 ideas for the census being done this way: national-religious, individual impact, and strategic thinking. How do you think they affect one another?
- What might be the significance of the leader counting individuals by name to the army?
- In what settings would you suggest that we apply this form of census-taking in light of some of Ramban's ideas? Why?

Retold Relationships

Bex Stern Rosenblatt

There are plenty of people who do not like the Bible. Often, they see it as a patriarchal text that supports the suppression of women. I hear this in many of the classes I teach, from everyone from twenty-something year old queer rabbinical students to learned octogenarians with a fondness for tradition. I usually respond by explaining that the dominance of misogyny often comes from the way that the Tanakh is read rather than what is present in the Tanakh itself. The women in the Tanakh are present and powerful. They take up space and dominate narratives. Their stories are not always happy ones and they are not usually presented as perfect beings but neither are the men. We encounter lifelike, messy characters when we read the Tanakh.

If there is one place where my argument completely falls apart it is in this week's haftarah, Hosea 2. Using a metaphor common to the prophetic books, God speaks about Israel as if it were God's adulterous wife. God paints a scene in which Israel is played by a whore who continually pursues other lovers, unaware that God is her true husband. God's response is to strip her naked and take all means of subsistence away from her, making her totally dependent on him for everything. It's a throwback to the good old days of the Exodus story, when we were wandering in the desert and totally dependent on God for food, water, and direction. Once she has been thoroughly humiliated and reduced to a state of utter dependency, God will marry her once again, making a new covenant with Israel now that she understands what her true relationship with him should be. In this utopian vision, God is an abusive husband and Israel is a submitting wife. And it's a vision that appears over and over again in the prophetic texts, though nowhere else as gruesome as here is Hosea.

So is everyone else right? Is the Tanakh hopelessly misogynistic? Only in some places. Israel is personified as a woman in relationship with God in many places in the Tanakh. By reading some of these stories in conversation with the hopeless story from Hosea, we can create a much more nuanced picture. In the Book of Lamentations, Israel will speak with her own voice and it is God whose voice is silenced. There, she will accuse him of failing to uphold his half of the covenant. She retells the story presented in Hosea, acknowledging that she has done wrong, mentioning that she had other lovers, but ultimately accusing God of failing to protect her, of punishing her so harshly as to become her enemy. Of course, the book of Lamentations does not have a happy ending. In this answer to the problematic prophetic metaphor, Israel can list the wrongs done to her but she does not have the power to right them. That power still rests with her abusive husband, with God.

We can turn to another intertext, to the Song of Songs. On the *peshat* level reading of the text, this is a lyrical love poem in which a woman tells of her flirtatious encounters with a man. But for millennia the Song of Songs has been read as describing the love between the woman, the nation of Israel, and the man, God. So much of the language of the Song of Songs picks up on the language of other encounters between Israel and God in the Tanakh that it is hard not to read the Song in this way. Indeed, the Song of Songs shares three intertexts with Hosea 2, where negative characterizations of the woman in Hosea 2 are interpreted to be positive attributes. In the Song of Songs, the woman celebrates her ability to look for her lover, to provide for him, and to honor motherhood. In Hosea, she was punished for looking for her other lovers, God had to provide for her, and her motherhood was mocked. The Song of Songs helps us to reinterpret the relationship between Israel and God, between man and woman, to choose love over misogyny. It does not erase or excuse Hosea 2. But it allows us to acknowledge the dark sides of the Tanakh and of the world without feeling forced to give up on them entirely.