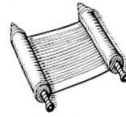


CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

THE CASE OF THE ADDED ELDERS: A MIDRASHIC MYSTERY TOUR

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Exodus 39:33 tells a seemingly straightforward story.

ויביאו את המשכן אל משה

את האהל ואת כל כליו

קרסיו קרשיו בריחו בריחו ועמדיו ואדניו:

They brought the mishkan=Tabernacle to Mosheh –

the ohel=tent and all its accessories . . .

its books, its panels, its crossbars, its uprights, and its sockets

The ancient translation known as *Targum Yonatan* retells it as follows:

They brought the mishkan to Mosheh

to his house of study

***there Mosheh and Aharon and his sons were sitting,
and he was explaining to them the order of the priesthood
and there the Elders of Israel were sitting***

and they showed him the mishkan and all its accessories

its books, its panels, its crossbars, its uprights, and its sockets

Now every reader of *Chumash* must wonder why the *mishkan* was brought to Mosheh, rather than having Mosheh come see it, which presumably would have been easier. *Targum Yonatan* explains that Mosheh was in his house of study, where he was teaching Aharon and his sons the priesthood, so perhaps they did not wish to interrupt him. The *Targum* then adds that the Elders were also present. Why is that relevant? The implication of the passage as a whole is that the *mishkan* was brought into a court session, before the assembled Supreme Court/Sanhedrin.

Why and on what basis does the *Targum* suggest this? I think the road to the answer runs through *Exodus 33:7*, which takes place when G-d orders Mosheh to have the people leave Sinai, in the aftermath of the Golden Calf:

*And Mosheh took the ohel
and planted it outside the encampment*

distant from the encampment

and he called it ohel moed (Tent of Meeting-by-Appointment)

and it would be that anyone who sought Hashem

would go out to ohel moed

which was outside the encampment

Why does Mosheh remove the *ohel* from the encampment? Here is the midrashic anthology *Yalkut Shim'oni* 394:

"And Mosheh took the Ohel" –

Resh Lakish said:

When Mosheh saw that they had lost out on a good gift, he too expressed

anger at them,

as it says "And Mosheh took the Ohel" –

A parable:

To a king who had one legion.

They rebelled against the king!

What did his general do?

He took the insignia of the king and fled;

So too Mosheh took the mishkan and left.

"and it would be that anyone who sought Hashem" –

It does not write 'anyone who sought Mosheh,' rather "anyone who sought Hashem" –

Even the angels and seraphim and gedudim would seek him to get authority to go out.

They would say to one another: "He is in the mishkan of Mosheh."

When the sun and moon would seek permission to go out – they would always go to the mishkan

I absolutely love the reading of "all those who sought Hashem," and the image of the sun and moon coming to seek permission. But it should be clear that they were not seeking Mosheh – they were seeking the insignia of Hashem that Mosheh had removed from the encampment.

Why did Mosheh remove the insignia? This text has Resh Lakish suggesting that he was angry at the Jews for losing out on a great gift, but why does that follow? For that matter, why would a general flee with the rebellious legion's insignia because he was angry at them?

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A look at *Midrash Tanchuma* (Ki Tisa 15) answers the last two questions.

“And Mosheh took the Ohel” –

Why did Moshe express anger at them?

Rather, Mosheh said: One who is excommunicate to the teacher is excommunicate to the student.

Resh Lakish said: A parable:

To a king who had one legion.

They rebelled against the king!

What did his general do?

He took the insignia of the king and fled;

So too Mosheh, when the Jews did that deed, took the *mishkan* and left.

In this version it is clear that Resh Lakish offers the parable to disagree with the thesis that Mosheh was expressing anger. Rather, the general takes the emperor’s insignia in order to protect the rebellious legion – without the insignia, the emperor cannot punish them.

This is a radical and dangerous move – the general remains loyal to the king in theory, but in practice he usurps the throne himself. Thus in the end the angels, sun and moon will come to Mosheh rather than to G-d for authorization, since only Mosheh can now issue authorizations.

But what is the real-life parallel, the *nimsbal*, to the royal insignia? *Tanchuma* and *Yalkut Shim’oni* both write that Mosheh “took the *mishkan* and left,” suggesting that the *mishkan* was the insignia. The problem is that the *mishkan* was not yet built! Or was it?

I think it was not, and that the *mishkan* was not the insignia. Why do I think this? Let us look at the version of Resh Lakish found in *Shemot Rabbah* Ki Tisa 45:

This is in dispute between Rav Yochanan and Resh Lakish.

Rav Yochanan said:

Mosheh understood: One who is excommunicate to the teacher is excommunicate to the student! Therefore “and Mosheh took the tent”;

R. Shim’on ben Lakish said:

A parable:

To a king who had one legion, and they rebelled against him.

What did his general do?

He took the insignia of the king and fled;

So too Mosheh, when the Jews did that deed, took the ohel and left.

In this version Mosheh took his regular *ohel*, not the *mishkan*. Why did the confusion arise? If you look back at our initial *Targum Yonatan* to *Exodus* 39:33, you will see that the Targum’s translation of the Hebrew *ohel* is the Aramaic *mishkana* – so that while the verse says “they brought the *mishkan* , , the *ohel*,” the Targum has “they brought the *mishkana* . . . the *mishkana*.” So I suggest that Resh Lakish spoke in Aramaic, but was misunderstood.

But why would Mosheh’s regular *ohel* contain the insignia of G-d? Here we must turn to *Targum Yonatan* to 33:7:

And Mosheh took them and concealed them in his mishkan of Torah study but he removed that *mishkan* from there and set it up outside the encampment distant from the encampment of the people, because they had been excommunicate 2000 amot and he would call it the *mishkan* house of study and anyone who returned-in-repentance with a complete heart before Hashem would go out to the *mishkan* house of study that was outside the encampment admit to his sins, and pray regarding his sins, and pray, and he would be forgiven.

We learn two things here: that Mosheh concealed something in his tent, and that he called the tent House of Study. It follows that what Mosheh concealed in his tent represents Torah, which is the insignia of Hashem. Most likely in context this refers to the crowns that the Jews received at Revelation and abandon in 33:6. The argument between Rav Yochanan and Resh Lakish is therefore as follows: Rav Yochanan held that Mosheh was angry at the Jews for abandoning their Torah-crowns, and therefore moved his tent away from them. Resh Lakish, however, argues that Mosheh collected their crowns and then fled from the camp before G-d could take them back. (Note that on *Shabbat* 88a, Rav Yochanan says that Mosheh merited keeping all the crowns. (In another *midrash*, they are what illuminate his face), but Resh Lakish says that Hashem will eventually return them to us. Perhaps we have here another appearance of the motif of Resh Lakish as *baal teshuvah*.)

So now we know that Mosheh has a tent that he called the House of Study, and which was also called *ohel moed*. Did he study alone? *Bamidbar* 27:2 suggests otherwise:

And they (the daughters of Tz’elafchad) came and stood before Mosheh and before El’azar the Priest and before the nesi’im and the whole edah at the entrance to Ohel Moed, saying:

On *Bava Batra* 119a we find the following:

Abba Chanan said in the name of Rabbi Eliezer:

They were sitting in his House of Study, and they went and stood before all of them.

Now – full circle – we can understand where the extra elders come from in *Targum Yonatan* to 39:33. If the *mishkan* was brought to Mosheh, he must have been somewhere else. Where else? In his House of Study, of course. Would he have been alone? Of course not – the priests and elders were always studying with him.

This solves the literary issue. But is there a message as well?

I think yes, and here it is: Why was it necessary to bring the *mishkan* to Mosheh at all? Why not simply erect it? Rashi cited the midrashic answer that the *mishkan* was too heavy to erect, but Hashem gave Mosheh the strength to do so.

The point is that ritual and spirituality cannot stand on their own – they need to be given meaning and purpose by the intellectual content of Torah.

Shabbat Shalom!

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