

And the Mishkan Was Constructed

פרשת פקודי השבוע

The Massacre at Yeshivat Mercaz Harav

In order for us fully appreciate the horrific events of Thursday night in Israel we need to understand what Yeshivat Mercaz HaRav stands for. Yeshivat Mercaz Harav is the founding Yeshiva of religious Zionism – it is the flagship. It is a Yeshiva that has produced the bulk of the religious Zionist leadership. It is a place that takes very seriously the notion of being a partner with God. Mercaz HaRav teaches a refusal to sit back and allow others to decide our fate. It is a Yeshiva that, in keeping with age old Jewish teaching, teaches that we must play a role in our redemption.

In many ways the terrorists struck at the heart and soul of religious Zionism, of the idea that our destiny is in our hands. For those who believe that the establishment of the State of Israel was more than a political event, but carried religious and theological significance, this attack represents an attempt to destroy that idea and break the will of the religious Zionist community.

It is an attempt that – as painful as it is – is doomed to failure.

On one hand we mourn this Shabbos, numb from the tragic and seemingly senseless loss of such beautiful children from the Jewish people. But at the same time we're struck by the seeming endlessness of it all; the impossibility of the situation; our unwillingness to relent and our determination to persevere, but at the same time our inability to see any way to extricate ourselves from a seemingly endless string of attacks. We thought that the problem was bus bombings. And when they stopped, we breathed a little easier. And then they fired missiles from Lebanon. So we attack there, and when that dies down we breathe a sigh of relief, only to be stung from Gaza, which no one knows how to deal with. And then, on top of everything, a brutal, vicious attack on children – beautiful, sensitive high school students. Children. So my mourning mixes with a sense of confusion and desperation; of bewilderment and anger.

I want to call your attention to a Rashi and a Midrash that stick with me today, perhaps to help me deal with this bewilderment that I'm feeling, to give myself – and maybe all of us – a renewed sense of strength and resolve.

When the Jewish people finally finish the work of the construction of the mishkan, the Torah tells us that

ויהי בחדש הראשון בשנה השנית באחד לחדש הוֹקֵם
הַמִּשְׁכָּן

And it was in the first month on the first of the month, the Mishkan was constructed.

On those very same words – הוֹקֵם הַמִּשְׁכָּן – the Midrash offers an explanation that speaks directly to the tragedy of those yeshiva boys. Why does the Torah speak in the passive form – that it was constructed? Didn't Moshe build that mishkan? What do we learn from the fact that the mishkan seems to have built itself.

The Midrash explains that there was not one mishkan, but two. And while Moshe does indeed construct the first mishkan, the second one built itself. According to the Midrash, in addition to the mishkan of this world, God wanted the celestial angels to build another mishkan in the heavens.

א"ר סימון בשעה שאמר הקב"ה לישראל להקים את
המשכן רמז למלאכי השרת שיעשו אף הם משכן ובעת
שהוקם למטן הוֹקֵם למעלה והוא משכן הנער ששמו
מטטרון שבו מקריב נפשותיהם של צדיקים לכפר על
ישראל בימי גלותם ולכך כתיב את המשכן שמשכן אחר
הוֹקֵם עמו

This week, we sent eight more Jewish souls to that mishkan.

The victims:

- Segev Peniel Avihail, 15, of Neve Daniel
- Neria Cohen, 15, of Jerusalem
- Yonatan Yitzhak Eldar, 16, of Shilo
- Yehonadav Haim Hirschfeld, 19, of Kokhav Hashahar
- Yohai Lifshitz, 18, of Jerusalem

- Avraham David Moses, 16, of Efrat
- Ro'i Roth, 18, of Elkana
- Doron Meherete Tronoh, 26, of Ashdod

I have a strong feeling that on Thursday night, erev Shabbat of Rosh Chodesh Adar, Rav Kook himself stood at the door of that mishkan, welcoming each new inhabitant.

But these two words – הוֹקֵם הַמִּשְׁכָּן – “the Mishkan was built”, also carry a critical and uplifting message for us this week. Before Moshe could finish the construction, the Jewish people finish building the different pieces. But the Torah tells us that instead of putting it all together themselves, ויביאו את המשכן אל משה – they bring it to him in parts. They don't put it together. Why not? After all, why don't they just put the pieces of the puzzle together and construct the final structure?

Rashi answers that they don't put it together because they can't.

שלא היה יכול להקימו שום אדם, מחמת כובד הקרשים – שאין כח באדם לזקפן, ומשה העמידו. אמר משה לפני הקב"ה: איך אפשר הקמתו על ידי אדם? אמר לו, עסוק אתה בבידוך, נראה כמקיפו והוא נזקף מאליו

The beams are too heavy. No human being could stand them up straight. But somehow Moshe stood them up. Said Moshe to God, “How is it humanly possible to erect this mishkan?” God responded: You work with your hands – make it look like you're putting it up, and it will construct itself.

The people build the parts of the mishkan. But when they're done, they bring the parts to Moshe and say, “Hey Moshe, are you sure this is what you want? Because we built you the pieces, but we can't figure out how to put it together. We can't complete the mishkan, and bring God's presence to the world.” Moshe wonders the very same thing. What have I done? Maybe I've made a mistake. But Moshe says something even more striking. Sometimes, the parts of the construction are too difficult. This week we feel like Moshe; we feel the הקרשים, the crushing weight of the beams, too difficult to bear. And we wonder: what's the point of building a yeshiva, a state, a country, a Land, a movement – when we see no plausible way to put them all together?

God explains to Moshe and us the very principle that has guided Yeshivat Mercaz Harav for sixty years. No – on our own, we cannot finish the project. But that does not exempt us from working on the project, and building the different components of the mishkan. God gave us the plans, and he wants each of us to build our piece. And if we can't figure out how it's supposed to come together, that's OK. That's not our problem. That's His job. We don't have to finish the work. Completing God's home in the world requires Divine intervention. But, as God tells Moshe, we have to play a role. – עסוק אתה בבידוך – “you get involved with your hands,” – “you start to build,” and then והוא נזקף וקם מאליו – and it will straighten and rise on its own.

This, explains Rashi, is what the Torah means when the Mishkan is finally completed. That is the meaning of הוֹקֵם הַמִּשְׁכָּן, that “it was constructed,” in passive form. Didn't Moshe build it? Yes, and no. He made the motions, but it built itself.

In response to tragedy Rav Kook taught the following.

The purely righteous do not complain about evil, rather they add justice.

They do not complain about heresy, rather they add faith.

They do not complain about ignorance, rather they add wisdom. "

We will continue to build. We will continue to fight. We will continue to construct the pieces of the project that will one day soon return God's presence to the world. We will continue to do our part. We will continue to be strong. And because we engage our hands, we know that one day that dream will indeed come to be realized, and the impossible will happen: it will straighten and rise on its own.