

# Pekudei

Exodus 38:21-40:38

## Gazing with eyes of blessing

NEHEMIA POLEN

Parashat Pekudei begins with a tally of materials that were donated by the Israelites for the construction of the Tabernacle: "These are the records of the Tabernacle, the Tabernacle of the Pact, which were drawn up at Moses' bidding . . ." (Exod 38:21). The accounting provides specific amounts in shekels for the gold, silver, and copper donations. On this, the great hasidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev (1740-1809) juxtaposes the following Talmudic passage:

*On entering the barn to measure the new grain one should recite the benediction, "May it be Your will, O LORD, our God, that You may send blessing upon the work of our hands." Once he has begun to measure he says, "Blessed be God who sends blessing into this heap." If, however, he first measured the grain and then recited the benediction then his prayer is in vain, because blessing is not to be found in anything that has been already weighed or measured or numbered, but only in a thing hidden from sight. (Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 8b)*

This passage from the Babylonian Talmud suggests that the bounty of a harvest is open and uncertain before it is measured. The crop may actually increase – its growth continuing – until such time as it is actually inventoried. It follows that the farmer may

pronounce a blessing, a berakhah, over his crop, inviting the flow of divine beneficence, shefa, only until such time as he measures it. The measuring has the effect of fixing it in place so that change is impossible. This is something like a Talmudic "principle of indeterminacy."

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak asks: If this is so, how is it that the materials for the Tabernacle were weighed and numbered, yet the Tabernacle was a place of blessing (see Exod 39:43; Ps 90:17)? He responds that there are two ways to look at an object: one way might be called "the possessive gaze;" the other way is the "appreciative gaze." The first seeks to control and has the effect of desiccating the object, emptying it of vitality and sweetness. The possessive gaze looks with desire, betrays the wish to grasp, to seize and incorporate into the self; it has the effect of visually pinching and constricting. As Levi Yitzhak puts it, this gaze "separates the object from its supernal root in the wellspring of vitality." On the other hand, the appreciative gaze is one of blessing, seeing the object in its own intact fullness and integrity. Such a gaze imparts bounty; it enriches by strengthening the object's connection to its sources of vitality and allows for the flow of abundance, the shefa, to continue.

Moses' activity of inventory, even though it involved measuring, was done with the gaze of blessing. The hasidic master playfully engages in a Hebrew wordplay, reading Song of Songs 7:5: Eynayikh berekhot be-Heshbon, "your eyes [are] like pools in [the place] Heshbon," to yield, "Your eyes are pools of blessing even while measuring [Hebrew heshbon]." Moses was able to make an accounting of the materials in the Tabernacle in a way that did not stultify or constrict; to the contrary, he saw the divine potential in each object. By extension, we too are invited to see the objects in our world – most especially food – not as commodities to be hoarded and appropriated, but as divinely-rooted sources of blessing, to be appreciated, respected and shared in a spirit of benevolence and generosity of spirit.

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*Reflections on Jewish Prayer* (2004), written with Lawrence Kushner. Polen holds a Doctorate from Boston University, where he studied with and served as a teaching fellow for Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel. Prior to his career in Jewish academia, Polen served for 23 years as a congregational rabbi.

*At the entrance of the Tabernacle of the Tent of Meeting he placed the altar of burnt offering. On it he offered up the burnt offering and the meal offering – as the Lord had commanded Moses. He placed the laver between the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and put water in it for washing. From it Moses and Aaron and his sons would wash their hands and feet; they washed when they entered the Tent of Meeting and when they approached the altar – as the Lord had commanded Moses. (Exod 40:29–32, see also Exod 30:17–21)*

In post-biblical Jewish practice, the washing of hands is associated with the transition from profane to holy. This can apply to physical spaces – Jews might wash when entering a synagogue, or when leaving a place that defiles, such as a bathroom or a cemetery. It's also evident in connection with food, when, depending on levels of observance, Jews wash before eating meals that include bread – signifying a proper meal, not just a snack. Relating these developments back to the hand (and feet) washing mentioned in this verse, it's interesting to see the respect in which all meals have taken on the holiness that may once have been associated only with food sacrificed on the altar.

DIANA LIPTON

## FORBIDDEN FRUIT

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A Commentary  
on Food in the Torah

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