

Vayyakhel (Exodus 35:1-38:20)

Deuteronomy 6:4

“Hear (Sh’ma), O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! (6:4).

The word sh'ma in Hebrew is such a beautiful and instructive word, speaking to the very heart and nature that God desires from His children. For the people of Israel are to be characterized not only by their attentiveness to God’s instruction, but also by their steadfast obedience to those very instructions. Sh'ma is a double command to “hear”—with attention, interest, and understanding—and to obey. In living the divine life, both aspects of the command are not only necessary, but without exception. In other words, to have one without the other leaves the follower susceptible to either irreparable negligence or inaction. In this week's portion, we bear witness to the fullness and reality of this command, carried out by Moses and the people. Upon the mountain, Moses listens attentively to the instructions concerning the tabernacle; as God unveils the pattern, Moses is imparted with the divine understanding of exactly what God is asking for. Now, in this particular portion, Moses relays the instructions to the people, and they are assembled with the same command: sh’ma, Israel.

Exodus 35:1

“And Moses assembled all the congregation of Israel, and unto them: ‘These are the words which the Lord hath commanded, that you should do them.’”

When Moses received the instructions for the tabernacle, he was required to listen and pay special attention to every detail that was given to him. The tabernacle would not be completed in the correct manner if even one detail was to be negligently missed or hastily overlooked. As we read a few portions ago, Moses was also not permitted to improvise, for the tabernacle was to be constructed as an exact type or shadow of the heavenly tabernacle. So, his attentiveness was of great importance because he was now standing before the assembly, preparing to pass these details along, just as he had received them. Let us not dismiss the fact that the people also, in this moment, were to listen attentively to each detail, just as Moses did when they were imparted to him. It was only through divine guidance and instruction that Moses was able to relay the information exactly as it was shown him on the mountain and for the people to receive it exactly as he did. Now, by divine command, the people were to take these instructions and carry them out.

Shortly after receiving the instructions, the people “departed from the presence of Moses,” and then we are told that a number of them, stirred by a willing heart, returned to carry out these instructions:

Exodus 35:21

*“And they came, everyone whose **heart stirred him up**, and everyone whom **his spirit was willing**, and brought the Lord’s offering for the work of the tent of meeting, and for all the service thereof, and for the holy garments. And they came, both men and women, **as many as were willing-hearted**, and brought nose-rings and earrings, and signet rings and girdles, all jewels of gold; even every man that brought an offering of gold unto the Lord.”*

The people returned, carrying with them EXACTLY what was required to begin construction. Men, women, young, old, individuals from each of the tribes stepped forward and obediently initiated the work that Moses commanded them to do. After the people joyfully surrender the material, the next couple of chapters repeat the same instructions that God went over on the mountain, only this time the people were carrying them out. For so many years, I often wondered why the instructions for the tabernacle were repeated in such redundant detail. Recently, though, the reasoning has become clearer: it is imperative because in the repetition we behold the sh'ma. When the instructions were originally given to Moses we witness the listening or the hearing aspect of the sh'ma, but in this portion, we witness the obedience aspect. In both accounts, we follow the divine process from when the Word is delivered to when the Word is carried out and completed, and it all happens according to the precise pattern and command that God speaks to Moses.

Sadly, we miss the beauty and the importance of this portion because we dismiss it as unnecessary, but we couldn't be more mistaken. If we are wise, we will carefully consider what we are being taught and the example being set for us. In the words of Paul, "These things happened as an example for us..." (1 Corinthians 10:6). Another one of the beautiful patterns of this reading that we ought to consider is that nearly every verse begins with, "and he made," "and he overlaid," or "and he cast", and everything that follows is in exact accordance with the very pattern shown to Moses on the mountain. This is not coincidence, because every word is calculated and purposeful for our instruction. Therefore, not only did the people listen, but they obeyed, and in their obedience they completed each phase of the tabernacle exactly as God designed it. What makes this tabernacle such a beautiful spectacle is not just WHAT it was built with—the fine material and precious metals—but HOW it was built. It was built according to the sh'ma of Israel, the attentive listening and willful obedience, exactly as God instructed.

As we consider the events in this week's portion, let us do so with the following understanding: the Kingdom of God is being built and established, or will ONLY be built and established, in the same manner as the tabernacle: "Sh'ma, Israel". When Jesus models for us what to pray for, He prays, "May Your kingdom come and may Your will be done on earth AS IT IS IN heaven." The pattern for the Kingdom is already laid out and the foundation has already been established. Through the life of Christ—His teachings and examples—we have access to the blueprints, just as our fathers did through Moses. What is required from us, then, is sh'ma, listen and obey. We listen attentively to the instructions of Christ who, like Moses, receives instruction and speaks only what He hears from the Father; in similar fashion, we, like Christ, willfully obey EVERY word given to us from above, refusing to edit or improvise, but doing everything as the Father has spoken. In doing so, our hope is that when the books are opened on the final day, that it will be written of us as it was written of Bezalel, Oholiab, the children of Israel, and ultimately of Christ, that "he made," "and he cast," and "he overlaid" exactly as the Lord commanded, and that we do so with "stirred hearts and willing spirits."