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**Of Parts and Pieces: The Instructions and Assembly of the Mishkan**  
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I

Sefer Shemot closes with the assembly of the Mishkan. After God commands Moshe to set up the Mishkan and instructs him with regard to the order of its assembly (40:1-16), the Torah reports that Moshe accomplished the divine command.

And it was in the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month, the Mishkan was erected. (40:17)

In apparent emphasis of Moshe's faithful accomplishment of God's instructions, the Torah continues to detail Moshe's carrying out of God's instructions. Following the verse above, it presents eight mini-parashiyot, each detailing the assembly by Moshe of some part of the Mishkan mentioned in the original instructions section (40:1-16) and each bracketed by masoretic text breaks known as "stumot" (40:17-33). Each of the first seven sections ends with the refrain, "just as God had commanded Moshe," and the eighth ends with the claim that, "Moshe finished the work" (40:33). The point cannot be missed. Moshe, ever the faithful servant, has fulfilled God's word to a T. He has not missed a step.

At this point, after the "instructions" and "accomplishment" sections of the narrative, we arrive at what might be thought of as the third stage in the process of assembling the Mishkan: the divine aspect, the descent of God's presence onto the Mishkan.

Then a cloud covered the Mishkan and the glory of the Lord filled the Mishkan. And Moshe was not able to enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud rested upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the Mishkan. And when the cloud rose from upon the Mishkan, the Children of Israel went onward in their journeys: but if the cloud did not rise, they did not set out until the day it rose. For the cloud of the Lord was upon the Mishkan by day, and fire by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys. (40:34-38)

As Rashbam points out (40:35), God descends to inaugurate and sanctify the newly built Mishkan with His very presence.

If so, we might think of the penultimate chapter of Sefer Shemot, the story of the assembly of the Mishkan, as possessing a simple linear structure. This can be mapped as follows:

Section One (40:1-16) - the instructions  
Section Two (40:17-33) - the accomplishment  
Section Three (40:34-38) - the public descent of the divine presence and divine sanctification of the newly completed Mishkan.

However, things are not as simple as they appear.

II

The "command-execution" relationship outlined above - "instructions" (40:1-16) and "accomplishment" (40:17-33) - leads to a very simple expectation. Everything that happens in the "instructions" should happen again in the "accomplishment." This expectation gains strength from some of the phrases and literary devices utilized in the "accomplishment" section, such as the reference to Moshe "finishing the work" (40:33) and the seven-fold refrain of "just as God had commanded him."

Moreover, the eight mini-parashiyot, each describing the assembly of a particular vessel or structure in the Mishkan, parallel in number, content and order the eight verses that command the assembly of the vessels and structures of the Mishkan (40:1-8). Finally, the overall "instructions" section closes with a forward-looking verse that serves as a transition to the upcoming "accomplishment" section.

And Moshe did in accord with ALL that the Lord had commanded him, so he did. (40:16)

This brings us to the nub of the matter. For those who have been following the numbers, the "instructions" section contains seven verses (40:9-15) that find no parallel in the "accomplishment" section. A quick glance at the text yields the following. After God commands Moshe about assembling the structure and vessels of the Mishkan (40:1-8), He commands him to anoint the various parts of the Mishkan and thereby sanctify them (40:9-11). At this point, God commands Moshe regarding the preparation of the priests, including bringing them to the door of the tent of meeting, washing them, dressing them and anointing them for divine service (40:12-15). None of this is mentioned in the "accomplishment" section! The following chart should illustrate the problem:

Moshe's Task	Instructions
Assembly of structure and vessels	40:1-8
Anointing and Sanctification	40:9-11
Preparation, anointing and sanctification of priests	40:12-15

While much space is given to the physical arranging of the Mishkan, no mention is made of the procedures necessary for its actual operation. This leads to the following dilemma. If Moshe did not carry out the commands of sanctification and priest-preparation at this point, why does the Torah emphasize that Moshe did "according to all that God commanded him"?

(40:16)? Alternatively, if he did carry out the sanctification and priest preparation at this point, why does the Torah omit them from the "accomplishment" narrative of Chapter Forty?

The mystery of the missing sanctification and priest-preparation accomplishment sections should help us uncover another problem with the structure and story line of Chapter Forty. Let us take a look at the first time that the Torah mentions priest preparation and arrangements for the daily functioning of the Mishkan.

Back in Parashat Tetzave the Torah detailed the process of "miluim," the ordaining or consecration of Aharon and his sons. Besides involving various sacrifices over a seven-day period, the process of sanctification also involves Moshe preparing Aharon and his sons in a very particular way (see 29:1). God commands Moshe to bring them to the door of the tent of meeting, wash them, dress them and anoint them (29:4-9). In other words, here we have the identical instructions once again given in Chapter Forty and omitted from the "accomplishment" section at the end of the book.

The lengthy instructions in Chapter Twenty-nine - regarding the "miluim" process, the process of priest-preparation, sanctification and transition to daily operation of the Mishkan - end with the orders for daily sacrifices at the door of the Tent of Meeting and the following proclamation by God:

This shall be a regular burnt offering throughout the generations, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting before the Lord... And there I will meet with the Children of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by My glory. And I will sanctify the Tent of Meeting, and the altar, and Aharon and his sons I will sanctify to serve Me. And I will dwell among the Israelites and I will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God who brought them out of Egypt, that I may dwell among them... (29:42-46)

Apparently, the presence of God in His house, the "dwelling of the glory of God" in the Tent of Meeting, depends upon the daily functioning of the Mishkan. As a consequence of priestly activity and sacrifices, God's "glory" appears at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, sanctifies the tent, "meets" with the Children of Israel and dwells amongst them. This constitutes the message of Chapter Twenty-nine.

In fact, chapters Eight and Nine of Sefer Vayikra, which recount the eventual accomplishment of "parashat ha-miluim," confirm this point. Chapter Eight details the bringing of Aharon and his sons to the Tent of Meeting and the other details of priest-preparation and sanctuary sanctification (see 8:1-13). In completing the story, Chapter Nine concludes with the appearance of the "glory of God" in front of all the people at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and God's fiery consumption of a sacrifice (9:23-24).

All of this should lead us to question our assumptions about the end of Sefer Shemot. Previously, it seemed obvious that section three of Chapter Forty, the filling of the newly erected Mishkan by the glory of God (40:34-38), constituted the natural consequence and culmination of setting up the Mishkan. God's purpose in commanding the building of the Mishkan was to dwell amongst the Israelites (see 25:8). Alternatively, the event comprised an act of divine sanctification

of the newly constructed sanctuary (Rashbam). However, as of now, all of this seems difficult. The meeting between God and Israel at the Tent of Meeting should take place at its entrance. The resting of His glory upon the Mishkan, His revelation to the Children of Israel and His sanctification of the Mishkan should take place in the context of priests and the transition to the daily functioning of the Mishkan. These are exactly the details omitted from the "accomplishment" section of Chapter Forty.

In other words, what is the purpose of the public divine revelation at the end of Sefer Shemot? If it is not about fulfilling the expectations of "parashat miluim" and the transition from preparation to operation, what is it about? If the theophany is not for the purpose of sanctifying and inaugurating the Tent of Meeting, what is the purpose of this unusual public revelation?

### III

The solution to our dual problem, the problem of the missing priest-preparation and sanctification "accomplishment" sections, and the problem of the nature of the divine revelation that closes Sefer Shemot, may lie in a close analysis of the literary structure of the third section of Chapter Forty. Previously, we defined this section as the public descent of the divine presence, and divine sanctification of the newly completed Mishkan. The second half of this definition clearly needs some work. Let us return to the text.

Then a cloud covered the Mishkan and the glory of the Lord filled the Mishkan. And Moshe was not able to enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud rested upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the Mishkan. And when the cloud rose from upon the Mishkan, the Children of Israel went onward in their journeys: but if the cloud did not rise they did not set out until the day it rose. For the cloud of the Lord was upon the Mishkan by day, and fire by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys. (40:34-38)

As argued above, no mention is made of divine sanctification of the Mishkan. Moreover, in place of this "expected" sentence, we are informed of the strange fact that Moshe could not enter the tent, an altogether unexpected situation (40:35).

To add to the perplexity, the Torah terminates its discussion of the Moshe, Mishkan and cloud situation on the day that the Mishkan was set up. In a radical shift of place, time and theme, the Torah digresses to another Mishkan and cloud context. It elaborates on the travel arrangements of the Children of Israel during their wanderings in the desert. God signaled them to journey onwards by raising the cloud, which appeared to the eyes of Israel by day as cloud and by night as fire (40:36-38).

Realizing that these last three closing verses of Sefer Shemot are more appropriate for the story of "travel arrangements," the story of [Bemidbar 9:15-23](#) that prefaces the Israelites' first journey from Sinai, should highlight this point. Bemidbar teaches the following:

And on the day the Mishkan was erected, the cloud covered the Mishkan, the Tent of the Testimony, and at

evening there was upon the Mishkan the appearance of fire, until the morning. So it was always: the cloud covered it by day, and the appearance of fire by night. And when the cloud rose from upon the Mishkan, then the Children of Israel journeyed, and in the place where the cloud dwelled (yishkon he-anan), there the children of Israel encamped. ([Bemidbar 9:15-17](#))

Just as at the end of Shemot a cloud covered the Mishkan on the day it was erected (40:17, 34), so too according to [Bemidbar 9:15](#), a cloud covered the Mishkan on the day it was erected. However, in Bemidbar, a story concerned with traveling, the ensuing discussion of the cloud and fire seen by the Israelites and the rising cloud signal constitutes a natural continuation of the reference to the cloud of the first day. By contrast, in Shemot, the cloud, fire and signal passages seem a bizarre digression, an inexplicable foreshadowing of a passage and journey that will not take place until deep into Sefer Bemidbar.

Finally, a quick glance at the beginning of Vayikra should complement the argument above. Sefer Vayikra opens with God calling Moshe.

And the Lord called to Moshe, and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting. ([Vayikra 1:1](#))

As pointed out by most commentaries (see Ibn Ezra and Seforno 1:1), God's unusual act of summoning Moshe picks up on the fact that Moshe was prevented from entering the Tent of Meeting at the very end of [Shemot \(40:35\)](#). Consequently, God summons Moshe and invites him in (Ibn Ezra). If so, the last three verses of Sefer Shemot, the story of the cloud signal and vision of cloud and fire, constitute not just a shift in time and space, a foreshadowing of later events, but a parenthetical comment, a deliberate disruption in the flow of the text. What are we to make of this? Is the Torah attempting a literary flourish, a high note on which to finish the book?

In fact, this deliberate digression creates an intricate parallel between the end of Sefer Shemot and an earlier part of the book. Let us consider another end in Sefer Shemot, the last verses in the story of Sinai.

And Moshe went up onto the mountain and the cloud covered the mountain. And the glory of the Lord dwelled upon Mount Sinai and the cloud covered it for six days: on the seventh day He called to Moshe from the midst of the cloud. And the sight of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain before the eyes of the Children of Israel. And Moshe went up onto the mountain, and Moshe was on the mountain forty days and forty nights. (24:15-18)

This last Sinai scene, Moshe's ascent to receive "the tablets of stone, the Torah and commandments" (24:12), may be thought of as consisting of the following five elements:

- 1) Moshe acts alone (see 24:12-15).
- 2) God's glory embodied in a cloud covers the mountain and dwells upon it.
- 3) Moshe is held back. He cannot enter and must await the divine summons.
- 4) God calls Moshe and Moshe enters to be with God.

- 5) The Children of Israel witness Sinai enveloped in cloud and fire.

The point should be relatively clear. These are the five elements present in our story, the seam between Sefer Shemot and Sefer Vayikra. Just as Moshe acted alone at Sinai, so too he assembles the Mishkan, seemingly unaided (see 40:17, 33). Just as the cloud of God's glory covered and dwelled upon the mountain, so too the cloud of God's glory covered and dwelled in the Mishkan (40:34-35). Just as Moshe was held back at Sinai, and only entered when called by God, so too here he cannot enter the area of God's glory until summoned by God (40:38, [Vayikra 1:1](#)). Finally, by virtue of the "digression" foreshadowing their travels, the Children of Israel are depicted as seeing the Mishkan enveloped in cloud and fire, just as at Sinai.

All our questions about the structure and story line of the third section of Chapter Forty should be answered. Moshe's inability to enter the Mishkan should no longer surprise us and the shift of the last three verses should no longer shock us. The Torah arranges the events and verses to remind us of Sinai. The Sefer ends not with a mere literary flourish, but with a reminder of Sinai, a deliberate echoing of Moshe's ascent to receive the stone tablets, Torah and commandments.

#### IV

To close the circle, let us return to the questions raised earlier: the problem of the missing priest-preparation and sanctification "accomplishment" sections, and the problem of the nature of the divine revelation that seals Sefer Shemot.

Hopefully, our analysis has uncovered the fact that the "dwelling" of the divine presence in the Tent of Meeting constitutes a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. On the one hand, it constitutes a means of immanent connection to God. Through the service of the priests, the sacrifices, the consumption of the sacrifices by signs of the divine presence, and the overall structure of the House of God, the Mishkan provides an almost material meeting between God and Israel. However, this is just one aspect. The "dwelling" of God's glory and presence in the Mishkan, or above the Mishkan, also constitutes a recreation of the experience at Sinai. As God "descended" to teach Torah and contract a covenant with Israel at Sinai, so too He "descends" to continue in an ongoing fashion the teaching of Torah and the covenantal relationship. On both the psychological and metaphysical planes, Mishkan provides a "portable" Sinai, an ongoing experience and reminder of Sinai.

All of this should help us resolve our outstanding problems. Quite simply, the end of Shemot is concerned with Mishkan as Sinai rather than Mishkan as a place of meeting (entailing priests and sacrifices). As such, the end of Shemot is carefully structured to emphasize the Sinai-Mishkan parallel. As such, the last chapter of Shemot fails to mention the inauguration of the priests, the sanctification of the sanctuary and the transition to standard functioning.

To close, I would like to argue that the emphasis on Mishkan as Sinai, i.e. communication and covenant, as opposed to Mishkan as sanctuary, i.e. a religious technology for meeting with God comprised of priests, cult and atonement, constitutes a fitting end for Sefer Shemot. As Ramban famously

emphasizes, the overarching theme of the Book of Shemot is redemption. But, of course, redemption constitutes more than just a physical state. Not until the Israelites stood at Sinai, heard God's word and entered into a covenant with Him, were they both physically and spiritually redeemed. Hence, the end of Shemot, the Book of Redemption, harks back to Sinai and reminds us that the spiritual redemption of Sinai was not an isolated moment in time for the Children of Israel. It was captured and continued in the Mishkan, the portable Sinai.

#### FOR FURTHER STUDY

The shiur above has followed the opinion of Ibn Ezra that the events of Chapter Forty all take place on the first day of the eight days of miluim. In other words, the miluim process began on the first day of the first month (Nisan). Ramban disagrees and adopts the rabbinic position maintaining that the eighth day of the "miluim" process coincided with the first day of the first month, the day Moshe was commanded to set up the Mishkan (40:1, 17). On this reading, the miluim process began on the twenty-third of Adar. The events of Chapter Forty more or less take place on the eighth day of the miluim. This disagreement, the proofs and counterproofs, deserve further investigation.

- 1) See [Bemidbar 7:1](#). Reread [Shemot 40:1, 17](#). What seems to be the relationship between the two verses and the simple explanation of [Bemidbar 7:1](#)? Read Ramban 40:2. How does he interpret [Bemidbar 7:1](#)?
- 2) Read [Vayikra 8:33-9:1](#) and Bemidbar 7:1-3, 11. Try to work out the reason for the position of Chazal and Ramban that moves the beginning of the miluim back to the twenty-third of Adar. See Ibn Ezra's discussion of the overlap between the miluim and chag ha-matzot in his comments to 40:2. Take a look at [Shemot 13:5-6](#). Might Ibn Ezra be correct?
- 3) Read Ramban on 40:17. Can we view his dating as a response to some of the problems discussed in the shiur? Does his dating fully resolve these problems? Reread [Vayikra 9:22-24](#). What constitutes the problem in viewing 40:34-38 as occurring on the eight day of the miluim?
- 4) See [Bemidbar 7:89](#) and [Vayikra 1:1](#). Read Rashi, [Shemot 40:35](#). Did Moshe enter the Tent of Meeting freely or only when invited by God? Are the events of 40:34-36 an exception or a rule? What is the opinion of Rashi/Torat Kohanim on these issues? How does this connect to the fundamental thesis of the shiur?

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