



THE POWER OF SPEECH

Category: Shemos

Why do we have the entire repetition of the tabernacle story?

Encore in the Desert

Just a couple of weeks ago, we read through all the detailed instructions for building the Mishkan and its special furnishings. And now—surprise!—the Torah repeats the whole thing as if we've never heard it before.

It's kind of like when a rock band finishes their set, and the crowd erupts in applause, demanding an encore. But in this case... who was so excited by Moshe's original presentation of the Mishkan blueprints that they needed to hear it all over again?

And here's another wrinkle: the Mishkan was never meant to be permanent. True, it ended up being used for quite some time—14 years in Gilgal, then hundreds of years in Shiloh with some structural upgrades—but at the time these instructions were given, the plan was to head straight from Sinai to the Promised Land, a journey of just a few days!

Even more puzzling is the fact that some of the most central mitzvos in the Torah get barely a sentence. Take Tefillin, for example. The Torah simply says, “Bind them as Tefillin between your eyes and as a reminder upon your hand.” No description of what they should look like, how they should be tied, or even what color they should be! All of that comes from the Oral Tradition.

So why does the Torah dedicate so many verses to the Mishkan’s construction while barely saying a word about some of the most fundamental mitzvos? The answer might just be hidden in the first few verses of this week’s Parshah, which—ironically—are the only ones that focus on a different topic.

The Power of Speech

The portion opens with the commandment not to do any work on Shabbat. But the Rabbis took it a step further—not only is actual work forbidden, but even talking about work is off-limits! They taught that “your manner of speech on Shabbat shall not be the same as during the week.” So saying, “Tomorrow I’m going to build my house,” is a no-go.

Of course, Jews being Jews, we found workarounds. If someone absolutely *must* talk about weekday matters on Shabbat, they do it in code. Instead of saying something costs five dollars, they might say, “It costs five challahs.” And if all else fails, there’s always the magic phrase: “*Nisht oif Shabbos geredt*”—“Not to talk business on Shabbat!”

Jewish folklore even has a classic story about this:

One Shabbat, a man walks over to his friend in shul and says, *“Nisht oif Shabbos geredt, I’m selling my car for \$2,200.”*

His friend nods, *“Nisht oif Shabbos geredt, I’ll think about it.”*

After the service, the friend comes back: *“Nisht oif Shabbos geredt, I’d buy it for \$1,800.”*

The seller shrugs, *“Nisht oif Shabbos geredt, I already sold it during Musaf.”*

Now, this might sound a bit extreme, but if you think about it, in today’s world, most of our work doesn’t require lifting a finger. Meetings, phone calls, emails—so much of our professional lives revolve around speech. More than ever, words hold power.

Just look at the chairman of the Federal Reserve. One statement from him can send markets soaring or crashing, making or losing millions in seconds. Entire economies can shift with a single press conference! And, of course, G-d created the universe itself—*with words*.

This idea is woven into our daily prayers. Every morning, we recite passages about the sacrifices that were once offered in the Beis Hamikdash. But instead of actual sacrifices, we say: *“Master of the Universe, You commanded us to bring the Tamid offering in its time... but now, because of our sins, we have no Beis Hamikdash and cannot offer sacrifices. Therefore, may our words be accepted as if we had brought the Tamid sacrifice...”*

In other words, the Torah tells us: *If we can’t physically perform a mitzvah, at least we can speak about it!*

The Rebbe emphasized this idea by quoting the Midrash. When the prophet Yechezkel hesitated to describe the layout of the Holy Temple to the Jews in exile, G-d reassured him: *“If My children study the structure of the Beis Hamikdash while in exile, I will consider it as if they are actually building it.”*

And the Rebbe adds: This isn't just a remembrance. When we study the Torah's laws and mitzvos—even the ones we can't physically fulfill—we are, in a very real way, *doing them* to the best of our ability.

The Answer

Now we can understand why the Torah goes into such elaborate detail about the Mishkan's construction, while some of the most fundamental mitzvos are recorded in just a word or two.

Mitzvos that we can actively perform don't need lengthy descriptions—we do them regularly, so their details are passed down through practice. But building a dwelling place for G-d? That's something we *can't* physically do while in exile. The only way we can fulfill this mitzvah is by studying it. That's why the Torah records every measurement, material, and instruction so meticulously—because through learning, we are, in a certain sense, *building it*.

It's like the difference between looking at a picture and trying to describe it to someone. When you see an image, you take it all in at once. But if you have to explain it to someone who's never seen it? You need to go into every detail for them to fully grasp it.

So when we read about the Mishkan's construction today, we're not just recalling history—we're actively engaging in the mitzvah of creating a home for G-d in this world.

And that's the key lesson: The mitzvos we *can* perform? Words aren't enough—we have to actually do them. But those mitzvos that we *can't* physically fulfill right now? We *can* still bring them to life through words—through the words of Torah.