

Dear Chavraya,

In a crescendo of excitement, *Sefer Sh'mot* / the Book of Exodus comes to its completion with this week's Torah portion, which in fact is a double portion, *Parashat Vayakhel/Pekude*. There are a number of portions in the Torah that are doubled in a non-leap year. In a leap year, when an entire month is added to our calendar, the double portions are separated, insuring that there will be enough Torah portions to go around. With all of the freshness and excitement that comes with the blossoming of spring, our ancestors gathered at this time of year to witness the assembly and dedication of the *mishkan*, the desert sanctuary. The entire community has participated in the building of the *mishkan*, and, as a result, there is a tremendous feeling of both collective and individual accomplishment. The *mishkan* is about much more than a physical structure, as the journey to its making is about much more than a spatial journey.

The great journey of a people, even as the human journey itself, is recapitulated in the lives of individuals, and so too the building of the *mishkan*. The entire Book of Exodus, the transformation from slavery to freedom, the desert journey, the finding of purpose and meaning at Sinai, the building of the *mishkan*, the Promised Land can all be read as metaphor for our own lives.

In the desert journey of Israel there were forty-two stopping places of encampment. In some of the places where Israel pitched its tents there was celebration and accomplishment, while in others, sorrow and strife. All of these way stations are part of the journey, each one adding of its essence to the emerging character of *Am Yisrael*, the People of Israel. Just as every detail is needed to make of the sanctuary "one whole," so each of the stopping places along the way of our journey, as a people and as individuals, adds up to making the sanctuary of a life.

The Slonimer Rebbe writes with exquisite sensitivity about life journeys, seeing the entire Book of Exodus as metaphor for the living of life. He speaks of the path of each person's life as having "journeys of ascent and journeys of descent." He then explains that it is through all of these journeys, the "ups" and the "downs," that the individual "arrives at the essential purpose of their life." The ultimate goal writes the Slonimer, is "to make of oneself a sanctuary," to be in the way of our living a dwelling place for God.

This Shabbos is also *Shabbat Hachodesh* / *the Shabbat of the Month*, the last of the four special Shabbatot that help us prepare for Pesach. Announcing Rosh Chodesh Nisan, *Shabbat HaChodesh* is a reminder to take up the journey. In ancient times, our ancestors would begin the walk to Jerusalem on the first of Nisan to be there for the festival. And in the second year of the desert journey, the *mishkan* was set up on Rosh Chodesh Nisan. A Shabbos of hope and encouragement, of journeys and sanctuaries, we say together in completing the Book of Exodus, *Chazak Chazak v'Nitchazek*, "Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another."

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor