BIBLE 365

Daily podcast with
MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

Exodus Weekly

Tony Blair's Bible Question

Vayakhel, Exodus, Chapters 35-40

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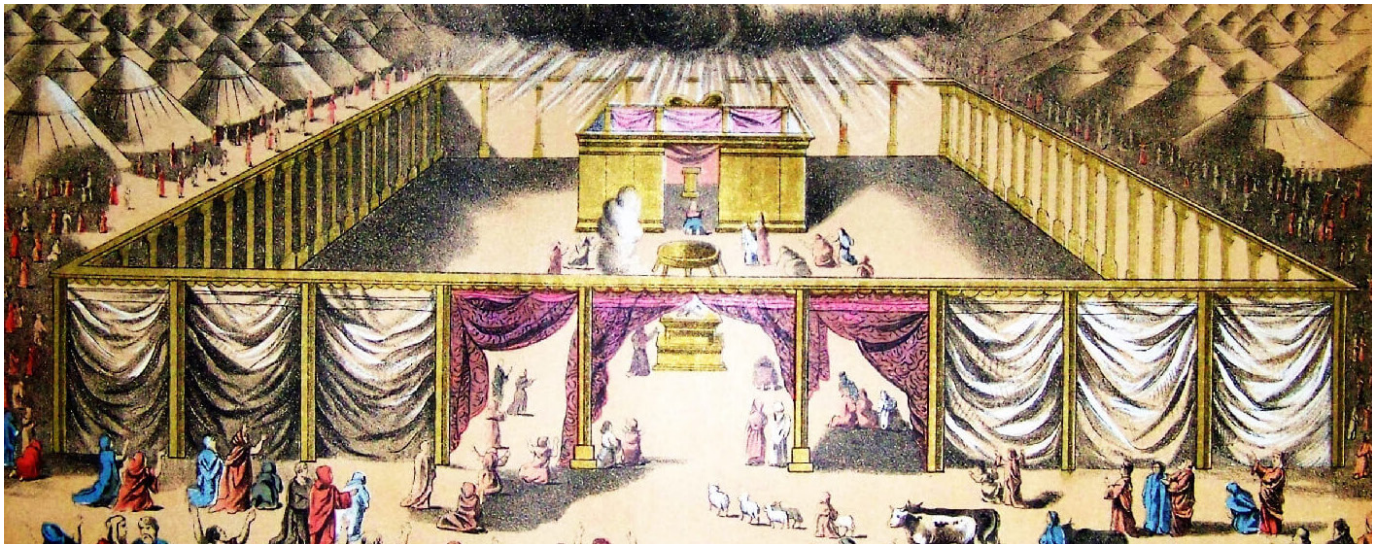


Our essay today is inspired by an important question raised regarding the end of Exodus, and the one who raised it is British Prime Minister Tony Blair. During his premiership, Blair would meet with Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, then Chief Rabbi, and they would discuss whatever bit of the Bible Blair was reading. As Rabbi Sacks recounted, one day, the Prime Minister said to him, "Jonathan, I've come to the boring bit of the Bible."

Rabbi Sacks replied, "Which boring bit of the Bible have you reached, Prime Minister?"

He said, "That stuff about the Tabernacle at the end of Exodus. It does go on a bit, doesn't it?"

Indeed it does, and we must ponder how seemingly strange that is. We have already seen how the Bible delineated in painstaking detail God's instructions for the creation of His dwelling place on Earth, and for the garments of the priests who would work therein. The Torah could then have easily added in one verse, "And the Israelites built everything according to the Almighty's instructions." Instead, for six chapters at the conclusion of Exodus, we are informed *how* Israel proceeded to build this extraordinary edifice—bit by bit, cubit by cubit, beam by beam, vessel by vessel, garment by garment—all overseen by Bezalel of the tribe of Judah. Thus the verses that we now read are seemingly repetitious.

In the Torah, every word is intended; every word is chosen deliberately. So why the elaboration?

Originally, Rabbi Sacks responded to Blair in a pithy but memorable manner, saying that if the Tabernacle took longer than the creation of the universe to describe, it was, he reflected, because it is easy for God to make a home for man, but it is exceedingly difficult for man to make a home for God. But later, Rabbi Sacks realized something: one of the most interesting aspects of this part of the Bible is not only what it says, but *where* it appears. It is found not in cultic texts of Leviticus, but rather in the political book of Exodus, which describes the formation of a nation. This, he understood, hints that there is a political lesson to be learned from the Tabernacle.

Rabbi Sacks noted that there are two ways of speaking about a political society. Western political thinkers, like Rousseau and Locke, speak of a social contract, whereas the Bible speaks most often about *b'rit*, or covenant. The social contract describes a secular arrangement in which members of a society ensure their own interests or rights; in a covenant, which is faith-based, the two parties come together to achieve what neither can achieve alone: a destiny.

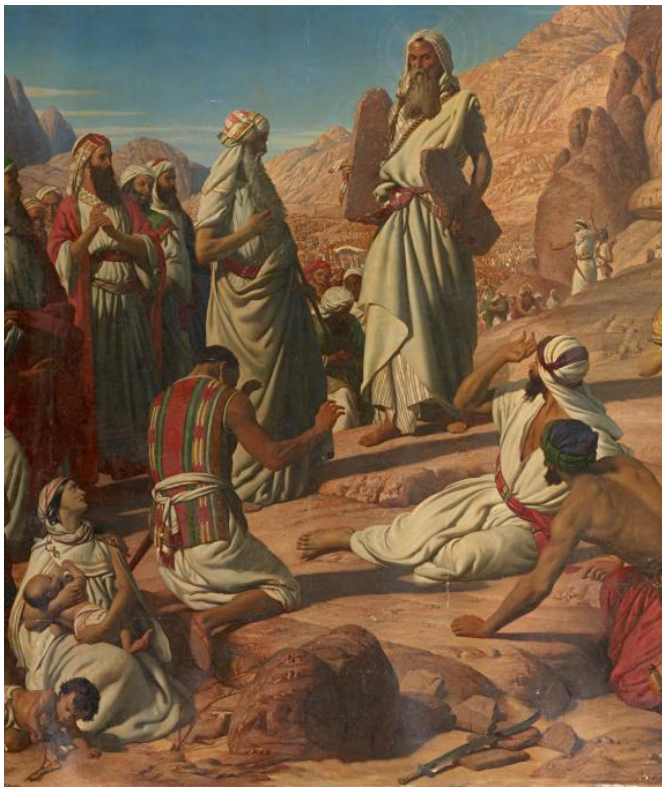
Rabbi Sacks notes that:

> Throughout history, utopian thinkers have dreamed of a perfect world in which all

> "[T]he Tabernacle story is one that teaches us that we need not deny our differences in order to covenant as one nation."

> individual striving is abolished, its place taken by harmony...That dream has led to some of the worst bloodshed in history. Utopias have no room for difference, and difference is what makes us human.

What we need instead, says Rabbi Sacks, is a society that embodies what he calls "integration without assimilation," joining community and individuality, allowing us to be neighbors even as we retain what makes us unique. It is to teach this political lesson that the tale of the Tabernacle appears not in Leviticus, where we might expect it, but in Exodus, the book in which Israel emerges as a covenantal nation. Rabbi Sacks writes, "to turn a group of individuals, or diverse tribes, into a nation, they must build something together." As he further notes, the contributions of the Israelites are all different, some donating precious materials, others the abilities of their crafts, so that they are formed into a nation through their joint effort. Society for the Bible is, in Rabbi Sacks' phrase, "the home we build together," and the Tabernacle story is one that teaches us that we need not deny our differences in order to covenant as one nation.



Rabbi Sacks' answer to Tony Blair is thus political and profound. But I would like to propose another answer as well, suggesting that the solution to Blair's conundrum was quite literally staring the Prime Minister in the face, in the building in which he worked, on the other side of the corridor of the palace of Westminster. I suggest that if Tony Blair wishes to understand the message and meaning of this biblical House of the Lord, he need only study a painting in the room adjacent to the British House of Lords.

The room is known as the "Moses Room," because it is dominated by a massive work of art by the British painter John Rogers Herbert, depicting the story we studied last week: Moses descending from Sinai with the second set of the two Tablets of the Law.

If you look at this beautiful painting, you will see not only Moses, but also the People of Israel who had been waiting anxiously to see if the covenant that they had broken had been reforged. The most interesting part of the Moses room is not Moses; it is the exquisite relief on the faces of the Israelites who stand at the foot of Sinai to greet him.

Bearing this in mind, and following the approach of Nahmanidies, let us study these chapters in chronological order. The revelation at Sinai occurs; then the *Mishpatim*, the laws of the covenant, are communicated and accepted. Suddenly, the plans for

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the Tabernacle—for the Almighty's indwelling among the Israelites—are given to Moses. But then the golden calf is made and worshiped, and the Almighty refuses to place His Presence among the people. This seemingly negates the plan for the Tabernacle. Thus, when forgiveness is granted, the Tabernacle suddenly becomes a possibility once again, and Moses can announce a new beginning:

> *And Moses spoke unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying, This is the thing which the Lord commanded saying,*
>
> *Take ye from among you an offering unto the Lord: whosoever is of a willing heart, let him bring it, the Lord's offering: gold and silver and brass,*
>
> *And blue, and purple, and scarlet and fine linen...* (Exodus 35:4-6)

When Exodus describes, in its last six chapters, every detail of the Tabernacle's construction, this is not just a repetition; it is a fresh start. Every vessel crafted, every piece of clerical clothing woven, is a sign that this chance of building a house for God is not to be taken for granted. Israel had come so close to losing it all: but ultimately the intimacy with the Lord *is* achieved. Thus, Exodus 40:34 describes what occurs upon the Tabernacle's completion:

> *Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.*

Reading these hundreds of verses that bring Exodus to a close, we might initially say with Blair: it does seem go on a bit. But this is no repetition; the text is teaching us that in the eyes of the Israelites, every opportunity to engage in the construction of the Tabernacle was suddenly seen as a sacred gift.

The repetition of the Tabernacle that so intrigued Blair is profoundly relevant to our own lives. Our lives may seem repetitive, and our Jewish lives certainly so. Prayer after prayer, *mitzvah* after *mitzvah*, Sabbath after Sabbath. But just as Israel bore in mind the shattering of the tablets and the tablets restored, we too can bear in mind the many shatterings in Jewish life, and allow those memories to impact us. When Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits became a member of the House of Lords, he was robed in the Moses Room. He then entered the actual House of Lords chamber, and spoke of his awareness of the shatterings of Jewish history, how it impacted his understanding of the moment in which he found himself. Describing his feelings at that moment, Rabbi Jakobovits said:

> My awe is all the greater because, unlike most other noble Lords who have been elevated to this upper House from the ground floor of common citizenship, I was lifted from the basement of refugeedom—indeed, from the even lower sewers of Nazi oppression and humiliation. I am ever conscious that but for the grace of God and the compassionate haven of this great country, I should today be an anonymous speck among the ashes of millions defiling the soil of Europe.

The rabbi's understanding of the grace of God, and of Jewish history, is reflected in his profoundly Jewish feeling of gratitude. And I, in turn, am grateful to Rabbi Jakobovits and Rabbi Sacks, both of whom served in the British House of Lords, for helping me to understand why the creation of the true House of the Lord was such a glorious gift.

Discussion Questions:

1. How can Rabbi Sacks' notion of "integration without assimilation" be applied to our own lives?

2. Rabbi Soloveichik emphasizes that many seemingly quotidian aspects of life should serve as sources of gratitude. How can we best cultivate this sense of gratefulness in our restless age?

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