

Echoes of Eden

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A Happy Ending

As we arrive at the end of the Book of Shmot (Exodus), we are left with mixed feelings. On the one hand, the book seems to have a happy ending. Any reader who appreciates the hopelessness of the situation of the Israelite slaves in Egypt as they are described in the book's early chapters, and contrasts their plight with the end of the book, where the people are free and spiritually attuned, must declare Shmot an exceptional narrative of liberation, a victorious tour de force.

Reading through the book in more detail would most likely lead the reader to the same conclusion: The book of Shmot is a success story, describing an unparalleled, epic march from slavery to salvation, from redemption to revelation. The hated, obstinate Pharaoh and his sadistic henchmen are punished, measure for measure: Their cruelty and arrogance lead them to the bottom of the sea. The Jews march to Sinai, witness the most glorious theophany in human history, and build a sanctuary in which this singular revelation can be recalled, recast and repeated on a daily basis. Shmot ends as the Glory of God fills the Mishkan, in the midst of this unique nation.

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Surely, as might be expected, there were some setbacks – small “mini- rebellions,” a degree of grumbling and complaining, a minor “military action”...even one glaring, glistening, golden transgression. But surely, by the end of the book, all has been forgiven and forgotten. Or has it?

This is the question that gnaws at us: Was this, in fact, the way the book was supposed to end? At first glance, the question seems absurd; what better final chapter could we have hoped for? The Glory of God Himself had descended into the completed Temple (Mishkan). The entire camp was transformed into a place of holiness, like no other known to mankind. The Children of Israel stood poised to continue their journey, to fulfill their destiny.

And therein lies the rub: This entire generation will never make it to the Promised Land. Likewise, their leader Moshe will never step foot in the “Land flowing with milk and honey.”

As originally scripted, the “screenplay” was quite different: After a short stopover at Sinai, where the people would gain the spiritual focus and energy that would carry them forward to their final destination, Moshe should have led the glorious march that ended in Jerusalem. There, the Presence of God would have filled the newly-built Temple, the Beit HaMikdash, the eternal seat of God on earth. The Word of God should have rung out from Jerusalem, as teachings of decency, peace and freedom began, first as a ripple but soon as a tidal wave of righteousness, to sweep across and enlighten the world. The inhabitants of the land would have bowed their heads, acknowledging that the rightful owners had come home; they would have handed them the keys and politely excused themselves.

But this is not how the book ends. In fact, the entire scenario never came to fruition – not for Moshe’s generation, nor for any other. The entire generation that experienced the great miracles described throughout Shmot, all the adults who entered into the Covenant at Sinai, perished in the desert, as did Moshe.

If we read the last chapters of Shmot while considering what should have been, the ending of the book is a bittersweet tale of missed opportunity. What we thought was a story of triumph becomes a description of failure. Shmot concludes as the temporary temple, the Tabernacle or Mishkan, is consecrated. In fact, the Mishkan should never have existed; it is but a cheap imitation of what was meant to be. Clearly, had the building of the permanent Temple, the Beit HaMikdash in Jerusalem, not been delayed, there would have been no need for a temporary construct that would accompany them on their travels through the

wilderness. The forty-year sojourn in the desert was not a part of the original plan; it was a result of those “little rebellions” and that golden calf. In fact, our bad choices had far more impact than we might care to consider. Those choices forced a detour – geographical, chronological and spiritual - that led us so far away from our goal that even after millennia we have not achieved it.

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Was the building of the Mishkan a pyrrhic victory? Are there times in our own lives when we do the same - celebrate what we think is a great accomplishment, without realizing that we are actually settling for a mere shadow of what could or should have been? Do we settle for spiritually inferior accomplishments, basking in their modest glory while stunting our imagination, not allowing ourselves to strive higher, to envision our souls, and indeed the entire world, perfected?

The Book of Shmot has come to an end, yet the story it should have recorded remains untold. The mission remains unfinished. We are charged with taking up the vision of what should have been, and seeing it through. In order to do so, we must liberate our minds from the artificial boundaries we have imposed upon ourselves, and envision a world elevated and free, a world in which the story of the Exodus finally reaches its glorious intended conclusion.

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/02/audio-and-essays-parashat-pikudei.html>