Sefer Shemot, which we just completed, is known more often by the name Exodus, a translation from the name that our Sages gave it – Sefer HaGeulah, more accurately translated as the book of redemption. Some are puzzled by this name, perhaps even more so when it’s called Exodus. While indeed, our leaving Egypt is the lead story, you’ve surely noticed in these past few months that there’s a lot more content which comes after that. Why then, call it the book of redemption when it’s not even half the book?

To answer this, Ramban[[1]](#endnote-1) notes that redemption is not just the physical process of leaving slavery, but also a spiritual process. It is the culmination of that aspect of freedom that we close the book with. We end with a discussion of the Mishkan, our successful project to have God’s Shekhinah, His presence, among us. Vayakhel-Pekudei is the joyous conclusion of that discussion surrounding the Mishkan, from the planning stages, to the donations, to the construction of its parts, to now, an accounting of Benei Yisra’el’s generosity and its actual inauguration. The first verse of Pekudei begins:

אֵלֶּה פְקוּדֵי הַמִּשְׁכָּן מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדֻת אֲשֶׁר פֻּקַּד עַל־פִּי מֹשֶׁה

These are the accounts of the Mishkan, the Mishkan of testimony that were calculated by Moshe’s order.

Many note the seemingly unnecessary repetition of the word Mishkan here. What is it for? Most of the answers are technical by nature, but Rashi gives us a comment more mystical, and frankly, far more depressing, especially given the context. He says as follows:

שני פעמים

It’s mentioned twice

רמז למקדש שנתמשכן

in order to allude to the Batei Mikdash, to our Temples, which served as collateral (mashkon in Hebrew)

בשני חורבנין על עונותיהן של ישראל:

in the form of the destructions which were the result of the misdeeds of Yisra’el.

In the course of our history as a nation, our Temples have served in our place, being destroyed instead of us. You may be familiar with how, on Tishah BeAv, we get up from the floor, and relax some other elements of our mourning at midday. We do so because that was the moment when the Mikdash began to burn down – while that sounds counterintuitive, it comes from a feeling of ‘at least it wasn’t us.’

Obviously, that’s not exactly a positive, but more the lesser of two evils. Better a Bet HaMikdash be destroyed than us ourselves.[[2]](#footnote-1) In any event however, our parshah would not seem to be the best opportunity to point out this message. Vayakhel-Pekudei speaks of a festive time, a time of great joy, of our successful completion of a house for God – as Ramban told us, our fullest redemption! All that work ending with God actually coming down to live among our people, yet here of all places, our Torah alludes to the idea that our houses for God will one day be destroyed? How do we explain this?

Forgive me, but with a memorable wedding on Thursday, and the many ways in which we were forced to do things a bit differently to accommodate the current reality, I have marriage on the mind.

Rabbi Yakov Horowitz, an accomplished educator and advocate for victims of abuse[[3]](#footnote-2), offers an answer to this question by first asking a question about Jewish weddings. He asks, why is it that the ketubah, the marriage contract, plays such a prominent role at a Jewish wedding? Why do we often have it signed with such fanfare at a hatan’s tisch? Why is it often decorated and hung prominently in the couple’s home? Why is it read under the huppah? I suppose we should be thankful that we don’t translate it under the huppah, because then things would get even stranger! While the ketubah is a legal document in which the husband pledges to take care of his wife, most of the document addresses what we might call ‘Plan B’ – how finances will be dealt with in the event of divorce or the husband’s death. In a similar vein as our Mishkan question then, we can ask, ‘why does the ketubah receive this celebrated treatment?’ This is especially confusing when all of its popular elements – its timing at the wedding, the custom to decorate and display it – are not required by law, and could technically speaking, be done away with.

Rabbi Horowitz[[4]](#footnote-3) answers these questions as follows:

“When one enters a short-term arrangement, such as taking a hotel room or renting a car, a simple and relatively short document is prepared, listing the fees and terms. The customer signs the papers, usually without even reading them. However, when one purchases a home or enters into a long-term business partnership, the process is much more solemn and complicated. Documents are drawn and read carefully by all parties and their attorneys.

Even if it sounds counter-intuitive, the fact that such care is given to a discussion of so many details - and exit strategies - only speaks to the level of commitment of the interested parties. In fact, I personally find the most beautiful words of the Kesubah to be where the Chosson (groom) vows to treat his Kallah (bride) with dignity and commits to supporting her financial needs during his lifetime and even after his death. What a wonderful expression of everlasting affection and commitment!”

We can suggest that it’s this sentiment that drives Rashi’s *seeming* downer of an introduction into parashat Pekudei – and even more, is perhaps the very source that drives the philosophy of what we do at Jewish weddings. In this week’s parashah we’ve reached the end of the beginning, as our Mishkan, the forerunner of our Batei Mikdash, our Temples, is completed. It’s a wedding of sorts, as Benei Yisra’el prepare for a life of intimacy with God. It is precisely here where God tells us the contents of our ‘ketubah’: We’ll have rough patches. Things won’t always be as great as they are now. And it’s for those more difficult moments, that I need to tell you that this building, as beautiful and holy as it is, and as its other manifestations will be, they are not more important than our relationship. I am willing to tear this thing apart rather than destroy you and put an end to what we have together.

In Jewish thought, thinking about and talking about the worst of times – developing a strategy for what to do when things may fall apart, when we won’t be at our best – the world might not see it this way, but that is the best sign of a responsible and incredibly loving relationship. God wants us to know this as the Mishkan is being built, and he wants us to go through similar feelings at a wedding.

The Jewish community, along with the rest of the world, is still taking in the many adjustments to life that we need to make during this epidemic. I worry that out of a sense of denial (we may prefer to call it ‘optimism’), people are not ready to accept how dramatically this will change our lives going forward.[[5]](#footnote-4) Some are still making plans to go away for Pesah or to have guests come in – that doesn’t seem like it will or should be an option, and I would advise us to understand that recovery will take significant time. Even when our social distancing period and staying at home has come to an end, there will still be major changes to our lives that we’ll need to consider. Thinking now about how we’re going to make those adjustments down the road is a worthwhile endeavor – we shouldn’t think that it betrays a lack of faith or some other spiritual failing. As we see from the Mishkan and ketubah, planning ahead for the worst is a labor of love. The worst may come, it may not. Either way, keeping all circumstances in mind as we build a new future shows that we’re in this for the long haul, and that our communities and way of life are worth that effort.

Until this epidemic broke out, we had been putting a greater emphasis and focus on security and safety needs – while part of me felt like spending so much of our time and resources was ‘letting the bad guys win’, I also increasingly felt that all those efforts and funds reinforced an important message for us to hear and to hear often: We are worth all of this, our way of life is worth all of this, and any efforts we make going forward expresses how committed we are to making it all work.

The same will be true of all the adjustments we’ll have to make and anticipate in a post-Coronavirus world. Committed Jewish lives are worth it, and planning ahead will be some of the greatest expressions of love for God and His people that we can muster.

1. **רמב"ן – שמות, הקדמה**

השלים הכתוב ספר בראשית שהוא ספר היצירה בחדוש העולם ויצירת כל נוצר ובמקרי האבות שהם כענין יצירה לזרעם מפני שכל מקריהם ציורי דברים לרמוז ולהודיע כל עתיד לבא להם ואחרי שהשלים היצירה התחיל ספר אחר בענין המעשה הבא מן הרמזים ההם ונתיחד ספר ואלה שמות בענין הגלות הראשון הנגזר בפי' ובגאולה ממנו ולכן חזר והתחיל בשמות יורדי מצרים ומספרם אף על פי שכבר נכתב זה בעבור כי ירידתם שם הוא ראשית הגלות כי מאז הוחל. והנה הגלות איננו נשלם עד יום שובם אל מקומם ואל מעלת אבותם ישובו. וכשיצאו ממצרים אף על פי שיצאו מבית עבדים עדיין יחשבו גולים כי היו בארץ לא להם נבוכים במדבר וכשבאו אל הר סיני ועשו המשכן ושב הקב"ה והשרה שכינתו ביניהם אז שבו אל מעלות אבותם שהיה סוד אלוה עלי אהליהם והם הם המרכבה ואז נחשבו גאולים ולכן נשלם הספר הזה בהשלימו ענין המשכן ובהיות כבוד ה' מלא אותו תמיד:

In the book of Genesis, which is the book of Creation, the Torah completed the account of how the world was brought forth from nothingness and how everything was created, as well as an account of all the events which befell the patriarchs, who are a sort of creation to their seed. All of the events that happened to them were symbolic occurrences, indicating and foretelling all that was destined to come upon their seed. After having completed the account of creation, the Torah begins another book concerning the subject that had been alluded to in those symbolic events [recorded in the Book of Genesis].

The book of V'eileh Shemoth was set apart for the story of the first exile, which had been clearly decreed, and the redemption therefrom. This is why He reverted and began [this second book of the Torah] with the names of those persons who went down to Egypt, and mentioned their total number, although this had already been written. It is because their descent thereto constituted the beginning of the exile, which began from that moment on.

Now the exile was not completed until the day they returned to their place and were restored to the status of their fathers. When they left Egypt, even though they came forth from the house of bondage, they were still considered exiles because they were *in a land that is not theirs,* (Genesis 15:3) entangled in the desert. When they came to Mount Sinai and made the Tabernacle, and the Holy One, blessed be He, caused his Divine Presence to dwell again amongst them, they returned to the status of their fathers when *the 'sod eloka' (counsel of G-d) was upon their tents* and “they were those who constituted the Chariot of the Holy One.” (Bereishith Rabbah 47:8) Then they were considered redeemed. It was for this reason that this second book of the Torah is concluded with the consummation of the building of the Tabernacle, and the glory of the Eternal filling it always. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. With us having to close our doors for the time being, perhaps this is something to take to heart as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. You may remember that he joined us as a scholar in residence many years ago. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Weekly email, sent 3/10/16; I cannot locate his essay anywhere on the web. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Though some of it may be good – see http://rabbisacks.org/rabbi-sacks-on-the-coronavirus-pandemic-extended-newsnight-interview/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)