



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei 5770

By Daniel Bloom

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In the double portion of *Vayakhel-Pekudei* we read a detailed recounting of the establishment of the *Mishkan* and the materials used in its construction. Allaying any suspicion of corruption, Moses and his workers display a model of leadership and accountability in handling the resources of *Bnei Yisrael* that leaders of the world's nations today would do well to emulate.

Parshat Pekudei opens with the words “These are the accounts of the *Mishkan*, the *Mishkan* of testimony, which were reckoned at Moses's bidding.”¹ It then goes on to list the exact quantities of gold, silver and copper which were contributed by *Bnei Yisrael* and used in the construction project. Midrash Tanhuma poses the question: “Why did he [Moses] give an account? [After all,] God trusted him, as it says 'he is trusted in all My house.'”² The *midrash* answers that although Moses was trusted by God, some individuals did not have faith that a leader in charge of valuable quantities of uncounted resources would not enrich himself from the public treasury. Moses, upon discovering the suspicion, promised to conduct a thorough audit.

The Or HaChaim, an 18th-century commentator, asserts that the accounting also illustrates the diligence and efficiency with which the precious resources were handled. The Torah gives account of “all of the gold,” “the silver” and “the offered-up copper.”³ Picking up on the superfluous wording of *kol zahav*, ‘all of the gold,’ the Or HaChaim explains that ordinarily when working with gold, some quantity is lost in the production process, but with the construction of the *Mishkan* and its vessels, the exact amount of gold that was contributed became part of the finished product. Not only did the leadership of the Jewish people not lay hands on the public treasury, but all of the artisans involved in handling the contributions ensured that nothing was lost or wasted.⁴

The honesty, transparency and efficiency demonstrated by Moses and his workforce regarding communal largesse stands in stark contrast to that of leaders and officials in much of the world. In the southern African nation of Zimbabwe, President Robert Mugabe and his cronies of the ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union—Patriotic Front) have systematically looted and misused public resources. The Governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ), Gideon Gono, accused senior ZANU-PF officials of corruption costing the country an estimated US\$1.7 billion per year. Additionally, government grain supplies, upon which many Zimbabwean farmers depend to sow their crops, have been used as a tool to buy off allies while denying supply to political opponents.⁵

The people of Zimbabwe have suffered from this mismanagement of public funds and supplies. Fewer government funds are available for critical public programs, causing the disintegration of the healthcare and sanitation infrastructure. This has led to, among other things, more frequent and more severe cholera outbreaks as well as the

¹ Shmot 38:21.

² Tanhuma Pekudei 7, quoting Bamidbar 12:7.

³ Shmot 38:24, 25, 29.

⁴ Or Hachaim on Shmot 38:24.

⁵ “Crisis without Limits.” *Human Rights Watch*, 22 January 2009. <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/79817/section/6>

tripling of the number of women dying in childbirth. Farmers, lacking seeds to plant crops, have experienced decreased yields, compounding already severe food shortages.⁶

This abuse continues unchecked, largely because there is no mechanism to hold the government accountable for its actions. The lack of a free press or effective opposition to Mugabe's regime has enabled him to operate without transparency or accountability. In contrast to Moses's financial disclosure after building the *Mishkan*, Zimbabwean officials seldom release figures of RBZ spending, so it is unclear how many people have benefited from its programs or how the money was actually spent. And with domestic criticism suppressed and a muted response from the international community, the ZANU-PF operates with relative impunity.

Still, there have been hints of progress. In early 2009 a delicate power-sharing arrangement was signed between Mugabe and reformist rival Morgan Tsvangirai. There have also been efforts at introducing mechanisms of accountability, such as a land audit and a liberalization of the press. Unfortunately, these initiatives have thus far been stalled by ZANU-PF loyalists.⁷

There can be no doubt that the people of Zimbabwe require financial assistance from the international community, though clearly, monetary aid alone cannot solve a systemic problem that stems from the unjust and wasteful actions of the leadership. A similar idea was expressed by the Sforno, a renaissance-era Italian commentator who notes that wealth does not necessarily confer holiness. He observes that the amount of gold used in the *Mishkan* was far less than the quantities used in Temples. Nonetheless, the Divine presence dwelled more often in the modest *Mishkan* than in the first Temple, and did not reside at all in the opulent second Temple.⁸ "It is not the allocation of wealth... that causes the Divine presence to dwell amongst Israel..." Sforno writes, "but their deeds."⁹

Until the Zimbabwean leadership manages the community's wealth with deeds of transparency and honor, and displays the kind of accountability and thoughtfulness modeled by Israel's faithful shepherd, a sustainable development process in Zimbabwe will unfortunately remain elusive.



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⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Hungwe, Brian. "Mugabe allies block Zimbabwe land audit." *BBC News*, 4 February 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8492320.stm>. See also "Zimbabwe media 'still not free.'" *BBC News*, 8 October 2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8295834.stm>

⁸ Tanhuma Terumah 11; Yoma 21b.

⁹ Sforno on Shmot 38:24.

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