

DRASH PEKUDIE 3/16/24  
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Shabbat Shalom.

Much of reading Torah is immersion in its transcendental, ineffable, unexplainable mysteries. Yet much commentary on Torah tries to explain those mysteries and bring them down to earth. A paradox, no?

The little mystery I want to address today is similar to the one I addressed in my last *drash*, last June: Repetition. So, this *drash* is a sort of meta-repetition about repetition. So, this *drash* is a sort of meta-repetition about repetition.

Much of our *parasha Pekudei*, Chapter 39, describes details of fashioning the high priest's vestments. And it repeats passage after passage much of Chapter 28 in *Tetzaveh*, from three *shabbats* ago. For example, there we read, using the Uri Alter translation, in Ch. 28:

"two joining pieces it [the garment] shall have at its two edges, and attached. And the fastening band that is on it shall be of the same fashioning, of one piece with it, gold, indigo and purple and crimson, and twisted linen."<sup>1</sup>

Today's version is:

"Joining shoulder-pieces they made for it, at its two edges they were joined. And the ornamented band that was on it was of a piece with it, fashioned like it, gold, indigo and purple and crimson and twisted linen, as the Lord had charged Moses."<sup>2</sup>

More striking yet, in Chapter 40, two lengthy descriptions of setting up the *mishkan* appear in immediate sequence. For example, first we read:

"On the day of the first month, on the first of the month, you shall set up the Tabernacle of the Tent of the Meeting. And you shall put there the Ark of the Covenant and screen the Ark with the curtain...."<sup>3</sup>

Then, shortly after we read:

"...in the first month ... on the first of the month, the Tabernacle was set up... And he brought the Ark into the Tabernacle and placed the curtain of the screen and screened the Ark of the Covenant, as the Lord had charged Moses."<sup>4</sup>

Now you will notice that these are not exact repetitions, in a few ways that I will return to later.

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<sup>1</sup> 28: 7-8

<sup>2</sup> 39: 4-5

<sup>3</sup> 40: 2-4

<sup>4</sup> 40: 17, 21

But the professional editor in me cries out, Why the repetition?! How inefficient! How boring! Why not simply leave us with the line (40:16): “And Moses did as all that the Lord had charged him....”

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Repetition, I take it, is common across ancient literature and certainly is in Torah. I see three kinds of repetition.

(1) There is micro repetition, the repetition of single words or short phrases. For example, “*tzedek tzedek tirdof*” repeats a word for emphasis. Similarly, micro repetitions and near-repetitions can create poetic echoes or emotional climaxes. At Nei’la we cry over and over again, *adonai who ha elohim, adonai who ha elohim*. I’m not focusing on these micro-repetitions.

(2) There are also macro, large-scale repetitions. Many stories in Torah repeat a basic plot—about sibling conflict, the younger replacing the elder, women at the well, flights to Egypt to avoid famine, divine announcements of a forthcoming birth, etc. We have reruns, sometimes with the same characters, sometimes with parallel characters. Are these just variations in an oral tradition that got jumbled together by a redactor? Or, are these, as Uri Alter has persuasively argued, archetypal stories that Torah repeats with a purpose and with critical variations that have a purpose?

Then, (3) there is a sort of middle-level repetition, not about a story and more than a couple of words—texts, for example, about architecture, vestments, and rituals, as we read in today’s *parasha*.

Why these kinds of repetitions, of the third kind? There are several answers.

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One explanation is that these are compiling errors, what happens when a redactor uses multiple versions of an account. This seems an unlikely explanation for the kind of text in our *parasha*.

Another explanation is that repetition actually serves the listening audience. When people learn Torah through hearing it, they need to hear the content two or three times. If you dozed off during the first listing of the stones on the *kohen’s* breastplate—ruby, topaz, malachite, turquoise, sapphire, and so on—you’ll catch the list the second time. Similarly, repetition is a way of pounding in a message to an audience.

But some scholars see a literary purpose even in inventory-like texts. One argues that sneaking in an occasional variation within a repetition is playful, “transforming what could have been a dry and laborious composition into a creative and imaginative literary product.”<sup>5</sup> The variations within the repetitions are like surprising musical shifts in a long composition or, in the computer world, like planting Easter eggs. Another authority writes, “The repetition creates a rhythm of expectations that variation subverts. Together they produce contrast”<sup>6</sup> which is enjoyable. [[The first authority assures us that ancient listeners had the ability to remember long passages and thus to recognize the variation.]]

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<sup>5</sup> [https://muse-jhu-edu.libproxy.berkeley.edu/pub/2/edited\\_volume/chapter/2803830](https://muse-jhu-edu.libproxy.berkeley.edu/pub/2/edited_volume/chapter/2803830)  
(Rendsburg)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pubs/9780884144762\\_OA.pdf](https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pubs/9780884144762_OA.pdf)

But what about a theological reason for repetition?

Commentators have argued that these passages echo or rhyme the opening chapter of *Bereshit*, particularly in the way that the passages in *Bereshit* “and God saw that it was good” are echoed here in “as the Lord had charged Moses.”

But there is, I think, a deeper parallel.

In both *Bereshit 1* and this *parasha*, the first text is God’s declaration. In *Bereshit* [11], for example, we read “And God said, ‘Let the Earth grow grass...’” The second text [12] tells us “And the earth put forth grass.”

The wording is slightly changed; it is now past tense. Then, in the repetition, God approves God’s own handiwork. Today’s passages are similar: God declares, it happens described in past tense, and God approves. So, for example, Moses “screened the Ark of the Covenant, as the Lord had charged Moses.”

The profound variation today, I’ll suggest, is that, unlike in *Bereshit*, God has a partner in creation—here creation of the *mishkan*, the priestly vestments, and the rituals. God has a human, Moses, and his human helpers. Now, God did not need partners. After all, the God who had alone created the heavens above and the waters below, the fowl of the air and the fish of the sea, could certainly create a priestly robe alone. But God chose to work with and through humans. And when the humans perform well, God sees that it is good.

The ineffable mystery of Torah is reaffirmed even in such redundancy, because this repetition leads us to ask how is that we can best be God’s partner in the making of the world.

Shabbat Shalom.