

Parshat Vayakhel (Exodus 35:1-38:20)
Another Chance
March 04, 2005
Rabbi Lisa Edwards

Also published in the Jewish Journal

With great sadness my friends decided to divorce in January 2001. They had given themselves one year into the new century to see if they could make it work, and it didn't seem as if they could. Then, in 2002, they happily reconciled. When asked why, they say Sept. 11 brought them back together; it helped them refocus their priorities.

They bought a house they both love and they remodeled it together. Their tastes were suddenly so similar, and these days they could compromise so easily when necessary. Nothing was hard, not even when the contractors "needed a little more time," not even when the previously undiscovered foundation crack swallowed the money intended for the new kitchen, not even when their new foster child made the quarters a little tighter than they'd anticipated.

Unexpected "set-backs," the kind of thing that used to have them yelling at each other, suddenly seemed funny, led to changes in plans that led to whimsical changes in design. It's a beautiful house – they love it. It's a beautiful home – they love each other. They feel so grateful to be together again.

Perhaps you know my friends. Or are them. Perhaps you've experienced such a reprioritizing in your life. It doesn't only come on the heels of tragedy or even of the unexpected, but it often does. It often takes something "big" to shake us up, to cause us to change. It doesn't even always take so big a change; sometimes it just calls for a different lens, another focus, a new appreciation. Marcel Proust, author of "Remembrance of Things Past," wrote, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes."

A new lens, another focus, "new eyes," a new appreciation are what happens in this week's Torah portion, Vayakhel. In the aftermath of the Golden Calf, the estranged Israelites, God and Moses all reconcile, deciding to try again instead of giving up on one another. And it is in the ecstasy that comes with giving a relationship another chance that the Mishkan (the Tabernacle), the exquisite portable sanctuary with its ohel mo'ed (tent of meeting), is built in the wilderness.

Indeed, the description has inspired (and made jealous) generations of synagogue fundraisers, for Moses tells the Israelites that God wants gifts only from "the willing of heart" (Exodus 35:5), and soon the artisans and builders charged with the actual construction come to Moses, saying:

"The people are bringing more than is needed for the tasks entailed in the work that God

has commanded to be done.”

Moses thereupon had this proclamation made throughout the camp: “Let no man or woman make further effort toward gifts for the sanctuary!” So the people stopped bringing: their efforts being more than enough for all the tasks to be done (Exodus 36:5-7).

Midrash tells us that Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the second set of tablets on Yom Kippur, and the medieval commentator Rashi suggests that on the next day came the events of this Torah portion, when Moses began instructing them on the building of the Tabernacle. Just as we begin to build our sukkot – cleverly designed, cheerfully built, lovingly decorated by families working together – on the very evening Yom Kippur ends, so, too, in the wilderness did our ancestors (“all whose hearts are moved to do so” [Exodus 35:5]) begin their building of their protective shelter, the Mishkan (the dwelling place), on the day after Yom Kippur.

The lost faith of the Golden Calf, the anger of the broken tablets, the forgiveness in the new tablets, the heartfelt building of the Mishkan come to tell us that a post-traumatic moment is a time when fear can give way to relief, despair to hope, anger to forgiveness, hate to love. It’s been a difficult time in our world: terrorism, war, tsunamis, earthquakes, torrential rains, hurricanes, epidemics, diseases, abuses, deaths of world leaders, overthrown governments, elections, recalls, judicial decisions, constitutional amendments, and the list goes on. Whether as a couple, a family, a congregation, a community, a neighborhood, a city, a state, a nation, a holy land, a world – perhaps now would be a good time to “see with new eyes,” to look inside and find our “willing hearts.” Perhaps now would be a blessed time to begin (or continue) building a home together.