

# The Gifts We Make

Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei [Exodus 35:1-40:38](#)

Haftarah: [Ezekiel 45:16-46:18](#)

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For my son's sixth birthday party, I baked his birthday cake. On Thursday, I bought the ingredients and on Friday I baked two rectangular cakes. Saturday night, I decorated the cake. First, I made white, red, and black frosting. I then assembled two layers, shaped the cake like The Cat in the Hat, and frosted the cake to make his striped hat, whiskered face and body – even adding a black liquorish for his tail.

I don't cook much in general, and I'm not an artsy kind of person. But for some reason, for my kids' birthdays, I become obsessed and feel compelled to make this elaborate cake. Every year, my husband asks: Why can't we just buy a cake from the store? Wouldn't that be easier? He's right; it would be far simpler to buy a cake (which would take about 10 minutes to buy rather than three days to make). However, my mom always baked our cakes with us as children, and even though baking the cake takes longer, I can't imagine doing it any other way.

In this week's Torah portion, the Jewish people also undertake a consuming art project. At God's instruction, they build the *mishkan*, the portable sanctuary which housed the Ark and the tablets during the forty year desert trek. The detailed architectural plans fill nearly the entire last third of the book of Exodus. Thirteen chapters of the Torah are devoted to this topic. By contrast, the creation of the entire world takes only two chapters!

The description of making the tabernacle is incredibly specific and frankly tedious to read. Why then does the Torah devote so much attention to this topic?

The reason lies in a verb that repeats incessantly in this week's *parasha*. The verb *asa* which means 'to make' appears no less than times 93 in this week's Torah reading. By making the physical sanctuary, the people were also creating a spiritual space for God within themselves. Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk (a nineteenth century Hasidic master) explained that each person should fashion a sanctuary in their heart for God to dwell there.

The reason the Torah devotes so much attention to the *mishkan* construction is the same as why I feel compelled to bake the birthday cake each year. When cooking with my children, we create a kind of magic. The joy of the birthday begins not on the day of the party but in the anticipation of baking together. It's my way to thank God for another year of life.

Likewise, after fleeing Egypt and entering the covenant at Mount Sinai, the people needed to do an art project for God. They longed to thank God for the covenant – not through words but by creating something beautiful. They yearned to express their gratitude for their precious freedom and newfound relationship with the divine. Just as a newly married couple enjoys the task of furnishing and decorating their new apartment together, the people relished fashioning this sacred space for God. Like our ancestors, when we do the holy work of building community, we too create a home for the divine.

When we were finally done with the three day ordeal of baking and making the cake, Jeremy turned to me and said, "Wow, Mom, it looks like the real Cat in the Hat!" At that moment, I smiled and knew that all the effort was worth it. I imagine that my mom and God were smiling too from above.

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