



“Who Stays Your Hand?”: On Interdependence

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Being in a relationship is both an opportunity and a challenge. Relationships with others have the potential to be life-expanding, but to achieve this they must be built with delicacy and intention of mind and heart. The Torah portions of Terumah, Tetzaveh, and VaYakhel-Pekudei present various opportunities for encounter and connection—with others in general, and the connection between the Holy blessed One and humanity in particular.

At the center of Terumah and Tetzaveh stands the *mishkan* (tabernacle), its vessels, and the garments of the priests who serve within it. These portions teach us about the encounter with others and invite us to attempt to maintain connections even when they seem impossible. In Parashat Terumah, we raised the idea that God dwells among us by virtue of a Sanctuary that possesses a “blueprint/form” (*tavnit*), yet God is not confined to that pattern Godself. The *mishkan* serves as a model for creating a space for encounter.¹

Now, in Parashat Tetzaveh, the gaze shifts from the space—the structure, the materials, and the vessels—to those who enter it and those who work within it. The *parashah* opens with the

¹ “The Blueprint of Intimacy,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/blueprint-intimacy>.



preparation of the “regular lamp” (*ner tamid*), and includes the commandment regarding pure olive oil for light, the priestly garments, the inauguration ceremony, and more. It details their garments and begins to describe the service of the *mishkan*, asking: Who will stand within this House, and how will they bear the weight of closeness?

This shift from the structure and the vessels to the people who serve is also echoed in a passage in the Talmud. The third chapter of Menahot concludes with a sequence of laws sharing a common denominator: they all deal with things that, in the language of the Mishnah, “the absence of one invalidates the other” (*me’akvin zeh et zeh*). As the Mishnah states:

משנה מנחות ג:ה,ז

שְׁנֵי שְׁעֵירֵי יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְעַכְבִּין זֶה אֶת זֶה... שְׁבַע קָנֵי מְנוֹרָה מְעַכְבִּין זֶה אֶת זֶה. שְׁבַע נְרוֹתֶיהָ מְעַכְבִּין זֶה אֶת זֶה... אַרְבַּע פְּרָשִׁיּוֹת שְׁבַת־פָּלִין מְעַכְבוֹת זוֹ אֶת זוֹ. וְאַפְלוּ כָּתֵב אֶחָד מְעַכְבֵּן. אַרְבַּע צִיצִיּוֹת מְעַכְבוֹת זוֹ אֶת זוֹ.

Mishnah Menahot 3:5,7

The two goats of Yom Kippur—the absence of one invalidates the other.... The seven branches of the *menorah*—the absence of one invalidates the others. The seven lamps on it—the absence of one invalidates the others.... The four portions of Scripture in the *tefillin*—the absence of one invalidates the others; indeed even one letter can invalidate the whole. The four fringes (*tzitzit*), the absence of one invalidates the others.

Most of the laws in the Mishnah concerning this type of invalidation focus on the Temple, its service vessels, and the sacrifices. The meaning of the expression *me’akvin zeh et zeh* is that the absence of one part invalidates the rest: if one component or element is missing, the entire entity is disqualified—or, in a sense, the presence of the remaining parts becomes worthless in terms of fulfilling the commandment. In other words, there is an absolute



necessity for the whole, for every single one of its parts or components. Given that the vast array of examples refers to the vessels of the *mishkan* and the Temple, a specific worldview emerges: the Sanctuary is a space where special emphasis is placed upon the whole, on all the vital details coming together into a coherent picture. To put it in positive terms: the Sanctuary is a space defined by a bond of mutual dependance.

The concept that “the absence of one invalidates the other” reappears in a non-legal statement in the talmudic discussion on these *mishnayot*:²

תלמוד בבלי מנחות כט:

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: בשעה שעלה משה למרום, מצאו להקדוש ברוך הוא שיושב וקושר כתרים לאותיות, אמר לפניו: רבונו של עולם, מי מעכב על ידיך?

Babylonian Talmud Menahot 29b

Rav Yehudah said Rav said: When Moshe ascended to the heights, he found the Holy Blessed One sitting and tying crowns to the letters [of the Torah]. He said before God, “Master of the Universe, who stays Your hand (*mi me’akev al yadekha*)?”

The legend provides a glimpse into the celestial realm as Moshe ascends to receive the Torah. He finds God making what seem to be final preparations for its giving, and Moshe wonders why God is not delivering the Torah yet—why God is “delaying.” Listening closely to Moshe’s words reveals his assumption that God is being delayed because of a human being: “Who stays Your hand?” On the surface, Moshe is asking God why and for whom God is waiting, lingering over final details instead of handing the Torah over to the people of Israel.

However, in light of the phrase *mi me’akev al yadekha*, which echoes the mishnaic language of *me’akvin zeh et zeh*, we can offer a different understanding of the question: Who, by their

² I would like to thank R. Rahel Berkowitz for pointing me to this connection between the sources.



absence, would render the giving of the Torah invalid? Who is the essential component without whom the act is incomplete, or perhaps even void? Moshe's assumption—viewed through the lens of the Mishnah—is a bold one: the giving of the Torah itself may be “mutually bound,” dependent on something that is not solely divine.

God's answer to Moshe illuminates this relationship:

אָמַר לוֹ: אָדָם אֶחָד יֵשׁ שְׁעֵתִיד לְהִיּוֹת בְּסוֹף כְּמֵה דְּוֹרוֹת וְעִקְבָּא בֶן יוֹסֵף שְׁמוֹ, שְׁעֵתִיד לְדְרוֹשׁ עַל כָּל קוּץ וְקוּץ תִּילִין תִּילִין שְׁל הִלְכוֹת.

God said to him: “There is a man who is destined to exist after many generations, and Akiva ben Yosef is his name, who is destined to derive from every single passage³ heaps and heaps of laws.”

God tells Moshe that the Torah being given now is, so to speak, potentially rendered invalid by the absence of a single future human being. It seems that the giving of the Torah depends not only on the Giver but also on the receiver. It must be given in a way that its recipients—with R. Akiva serving here as the paradigm for far-reaching Torah study—can learn it and interpret it.⁴

Parashat Tetzaveh portrays a reality in which the interdependence of various components is fundamental—not only to the fulfillment of *mitzvot* but to the very nature of the encounter. The branches of the *menorah*, the lamps, and Yom Kippur goats all render one another

³ On this reading of *kotz* as “passage” and what it means to “tie crowns to the letters,” see Shlomo Naeh, “Al Ketav ha-Torah be-Divrei Hazal (Bet): Ta’atikim ve-Kotzim,” *Leshoneinu* vol. 72 (2010), pp. 89-123; and Yakir Paz, “Kosher Ketarim la-Otiyot: Minhag Soferim Elohi be-Hekshero ha-Histori,” *Tarbiz* vol. 86 (2019), pp. 233-268.

⁴ Even if that act of interpretation transforms the Torah to the point that Moshe himself might struggle to recognize it—which comes up in the continuation of the talmudic passage.



indispensable. The talmudic discussion in Menahot suggests a bold and far-reaching expansion of this idea, applying this interdependence to the bond between the Torah, the Giver of the Torah, and its recipients.

In this way, Parashat Tetzaveh offers us a distinct model for relationship. If Parashat Terumah emphasized the precision of the “blueprint/form” to create a space that does not confine those within it, then Tetzaveh highlights the interdependence of the partners in that connection.

Just as the branches of the *menorah* are bound to one another such that the absence of one invalidates the other, so too are the Torah and the people of Israel dependant on each other—and so too is every relationship between ourselves and others. Bonds are built on the recognition that my life, without the other, lacks something essential, that the other “stays my hand” in the most profound sense. It is through a shared existence that acknowledges this interdependence that life and meaning truly flourish.

