

## ***Vayyaqhel-Pekudei 5780***

### **Rabbis for Human Rights**

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Suddenly there are places we cannot go, enclosures we must not enter. Places we ourselves helped to build and furnish are now off-limits. How do we feel? — Frustrated? Angry? Fearful? In awe of an invisible power that can overcome us, consume us?

It is not the coronavirus behind the COVID-19 epidemic that I'm describing here. No, I am describing the last scene in the book of Exodus. Throughout 12 of the previous 15 chapters, Moses has been dealing with a public works project: the construction and outfitting of the *Mishkan*—the portable pre-fab, built-it-take-it-down-build-it-again “Tabernacle” for divine worship—and the manufacture of the elaborate clothing of the *kohen gadol* (High Priest) who is to preside over worship there.

im-a-rabbi-and-a-lifelong-reader-these-are-the-books-im-turning-to-for a detailed blueprint and instructions for the building. He has assigned expert teams of skilled craftspeople to do the work of producing each appurtenance, from walls to altars, from the ark and its cover to the table and the *menorah*, and the expensive, complex raiments and accessories of the *kohen gadol*. He has personally supervised the erection of the completed building.

Now, in the final chapter of Exodus, the Torah describes the scene as though Moses himself is doing all the labor, although surely he is not: “Moses set up the Tabernacle and put the covering of the tent over it from above.... He took and set the Covenant in the Ark and put poles on the Ark...” and so on, clause after clause after clause for 17 verses, until this finale: “And Moses completed the task.”

The work being completed, Moses has to step back, because “the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting and the glory of God filled the *Mishkan*. And Moses could not come into the Tent of Meeting, for the cloud abode upon it and the glory of the Lord filled the *Mishkan*.”

Those of us now warned not to visit frail elderly relatives, those of us kept away from the work we chose to do in our laboratories, offices, and classrooms, and those of us unable to travel to be with people we love—all of us can identify with Moshe Rabbenu at that moment in his life. So much is going to happen that we are going to have to view from the outside, or only hear about afterward! The places we frequent—including our synagogues and the communities that fill them—are now unavailable to us.

In Moses' case, that moment was bittersweet; the tasks having been completed, the *Mishkan* became God's sacred dwelling-place on earth. That was undoubtedly an awesome, frightening sight. At the same time, we can imagine it gave Moses a sense of accomplishment that would be hard to replicate: he has succeeded in fulfilling God's

command, “Let them make me a sanctuary,” and ensured its concomitant promise: “... and I will dwell in their midst.”

In our situation now, we hope that the divine presence will be manifest in spaces from which we are excluded. Just as “the Lord’s cloud was over the *Mishkan* by day and fire by night was in it,” we hope that our loved ones will be safe, that our communities will emerge strengthened, and that the work of health care professionals, government leaders, and all those providing vital services enjoy divine guidance and protection.