

Pekude, Exodus 38:21-40:38

BEZALEL: A MASTER ARCHITECT OF SACRED SPACE

John L. Rosove

In this week's portion, *Parashat Pekude*, we learn about Bezalel, who was chosen to design and build the Tabernacle, the *Mishkan*. (Exodus 38:22-39:31) On the face of it, these verses describe the matter-of-fact building of a physical edifice. But this is not merely an architectural plan. Rather, it is a description of the highest aesthetic vision of the ancient Israelites, a vision that would impress itself upon the soul of generations of Jews to come.

Not just any craftsman was chosen to design and build the *Mishkan*. Bezalel was endowed with wisdom, *chochmah*; insight, *binah*; and understanding, *da-at*. (Exodus 35:30-34) What is the difference among these attributes? Rashi suggests that *chochmah* refers to the wisdom that we learn from others; *binah* is the understanding that we acquire from life experience; and *da-at* is mystical intuition. Following Rashi, Jewish legend claims that Bezalel was well versed in the *Kabbalah* and that he understood the full impact of the combinations of letters with which God created the heavens and the earth.

Bezalel was brilliant in mind, a master craftsman and architect, seasoned by life's experiences, openhearted and open-minded to the insights of his fellows, inspired with God's spirit, and endowed with the capacity to perceive the fundamental laws and truths that lie at the cosmic core of creation. Bezalel's name, which in Hebrew means "to rest in God's shadow," suggests that he intuited and was one with God's will.

And yet, a *midrash* argues that even these characteristics alone were not enough for him to assume this duty. According to this *midrash*, God asked Moses if Bezalel was suited for the sacred task of building the *Mishkan*. Moses replied, "Master of the universe! If You consider him suitable, then surely I do!" Whereupon God instructed Moses, "Go and ask Israel if they approve of my choice of Bezalel." Moses did so, and the people replied, "If Bezalel is judged good enough by God and by you, surely he is approved by us, too." From this the rabbis concluded that Bezalel was not only God's choice but the people's choice as well.

This simple story of Bezalel's selection suggests that tradition regards devotion to God, to Torah, and to the people of Israel to be the most important characteristics of a Jewish artist. Through the ages, Jewish artists have depicted in their work the suffering, pain, joys, and vision of our people. Mark Chagall wrote that "the artist must penetrate into the world, feel the fate of human beings, of peoples, with real love. There is no art for art's sake. One must be interested in the entire realm of life."

At the 1999 Orlando Biennial, Rabbi Eric Yoffie called upon us to refocus our attention on creating more vital, passionate, and meaningful communal prayer. Part of that refocusing must encompass how we use our sacred spaces. Following the example of *Pekude*, we must include our Jewish artists in such discussions because they, like Bezalel, have the capacity to help us direct one of our eyes heavenward while at the same time focusing the other on human affairs, thereby drawing us simultaneously nearer to one another and to the Cosmic Core of the universe. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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ATTENTION IS IN THE DETAILS

Adele Lander Burke

The description of the building of the Tabernacle, the *Mishkan*, in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Pekude*, is a continuation of the account that began last week in *Parashat Vayakhel*. In some calendar years these two portions are combined and read in the same week, indicating the continuation of the narrative.

As we read both portions, we are struck by the incredible attention to detail depicted in the text. We can imagine the lush textiles, sparkling metals, and ingenious designs that were used for the creation of the portable sanctuary and the garments of the High Priest. We also ask the following: Why does the text provide so many mundane details here while in other parts of the Bible so much seems to have been left out? Wouldn't we have preferred to know more about Abraham's thoughts as he prepared to sacrifice Isaac than about how many talents of silver were needed to make the sockets for the *Mishkan*?

We can find one explanation when we consider the authorship of these portions. Bible scholars who follow the school of Critical Theory suggest that the biblical canon includes many stories that were written by different authors over a span of several hundred years. The ancestral stories may have been composed by a school of writers who were striving to create a literary record of our people's earliest history. The detailed stories of the creation of the Tabernacle and Tent of Meeting were probably composed by priestly writers who were concerned with preserving and justifying the important role of the priestly rituals in Israelite history. Some scholars believe that the detailed descriptions presented in *Vayakhel* and *Pekude* are really about describing the accoutrements of the First Temple, which was built some 400 years after the Children of Israel's wandering in the desert. A wonderful introduction to Critical Theory appears in Richard Elliott Friedman's *Who Wrote the Bible?*

As we read this portion in the twenty-first century, we are reminded of the importance of treating our houses of worship with respect and love. When designing, remodeling, or maintaining our sanctuaries, we need to pay attention to the details. We should strive to create a space that truly reflects our relationship to God by considering the aesthetics of the process to be as important as the practical aspects of wiring, lighting, and plumbing. This process will only be infused with spiritual meaning if we keep in mind that what we are doing is honoring God and Torah by creating a special place in which to worship. Just as Moses chose Bezalel to head the design team, so, too, we should include Jewish artists on our planning teams to insure that we achieve and maintain a high aesthetic standard when we erect our houses of worship.

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The Ordinary and the Extraordinary **Harry K. Danziger**

Three workmen were clearing away debris at the site where a synagogue would be built. A passerby asked, “What are you doing?” The first said, “I’m clearing away rubble.” The second said, “I’m earning a living.” The third said, “I’m building a house of God.” Each of them was right, but each one expressed a very different reality.

Parashat P’kudei begins, like the first workman, in the most mundane way. It’s an account book, a log of materials used to build the Tabernacle. It records such facts as “we used so much gold and so much silver and so much of this and so much of that.” It continues with something like “instructions for assembly.”

At face value, this last *parashah* of the Book of Exodus is not very exciting. And what an anticlimax it would be if after the sagas of slavery and redemption, the Red Sea and Sinai, Exodus were to end with this record of materials and building activities. Yet it is only when the mundane work has been done that the God-cloud that guides Israel’s journey confers a sense of God’s presence on a building. Without the gold and silver, and the physical labor, there would be no cloud of God residing at the Tabernacle.

The God-cloud assures Israel that they have not left God behind at Sinai. Nor need they fear that God abandoned them after the sin of the Golden Calf. So long as that cloud is there, they know that they are never a God-forsaken people in a God-forsaken place. God is with them.

Of course, some Israelites may have looked at it and said, “Big deal! A cloud! Seen one, seen them all.” As in the case of the workmen, it depends on who sees it and what she or he brings to it.

Remember Jacob on his first night away from home. He went to sleep in a desert with a rock for his pillow. But after his dream, he woke and said, “Surely *Adonai* is present in this place, and I did not know it!” Shaken, he said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven” (Genesis 28:16–17). In one sense, nothing had changed. Jacob was still alone, still fleeing, still in a desert. Yet he saw the situation differently. A rocky pillow became a sacred pillar that he dedicated to God. A spot in the desert became “the abode of God” and “the gateway to heaven,” but only because Jacob saw it that way. Another traveler in the same spot on the next night may have seen a barren wasteland, a rock, and nothing more. Later, in another desert, who knows how many people walked by the Burning Bush before Moses said, “I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight” (Exodus 3:3)?

But what about those of us who don’t see God beckoning from a burning bush? What happens to those of us who don’t dream Jacob’s dream, assuring us of God’s promise, or don’t have the God-cloud over the Tabernacle? How can we bring God into our lives rather than waiting for God to enter miraculously? One way is to say a *b’rachah*, a blessing. To say *HaMotzi* before eating a sandwich or a feast—that is to make a God-moment. To say *Shehecheyanu* when a child first crawls or when we get a good report from the doctor or when a potential crisis is averted—that is to make a God-moment. To say *asher kid’shanu*, “who makes us holy,” when writing a check for *tzedakah* or delivering meals to the needy or calling someone who is lonely—that is to make a God-moment. You don’t even need to know a special *b’rachah*. When you see a friend you’ve missed for a while, when your child gives you a hug, when your plane lands safely after an uneventful trip, just say, *Baruch HaShem*, “Thank God.” When we do this, on the surface nothing changes, but, in a larger sense, everything does. We go from “clearing away rubble” to “building a house of God.”

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FROM B'NEI YISRAEL (THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL) TO BEIT YISRAEL (THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL)

Bruce Kadden

When the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the Israelites would set out, on their various journeys; but if the cloud did not lift, they would not set out until such time as it did lift. For over the Tabernacle a cloud of *Adonai* rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys. (Exodus 40:36–38)

These verses conclude the Book of Exodus, providing us with the opportunity to reflect on how far we have come during the last ten weeks that we have been reading it.

Exodus begins by recalling *B'nei Yisrael*, the sons of Jacob, who came to Egypt, each with his household. Although brothers, they were clearly a disparate group, no doubt still bearing the grudges and conflicts that nearly tore their family apart in Canaan. Dina and her family are not even mentioned. Were they left behind or just ignored?

Now, at the end of Exodus, and for the second time in the Torah, the people are called *Beit Yisrael*, the “House of Israel.” During the relatively short time they have been wandering in the wilderness, they have already been transformed from *B'nei Yisrael* to *Beit Yisrael*, from individuals who happened to share a common history (and some—such as the “mixed multitude” who left Egypt with them—who did not) to a community with a common destiny. They will still have disagreements, conflicts, and even significant rebellions, but nothing that happens can undermine or destroy their fundamental identity as a community, the identity of being *Beit Yisrael*.

The use of the word *beit*, “house,” to describe the people is significant. The most important Jewish institutions are houses: *beit sefer* is school, *beit k'neset* is synagogue, and *Beit HaMikdash* is the Temple.

The word “house” signifies unity and implies that those who are part of it share a common purpose. Though members of a house do not always get along or agree, they have an implicit commitment to each other and to the house as a whole. A house also signifies stability and structure. Though their designs and sizes may vary, houses are physical entities that symbolize the strength and substance of those who live within them. Houses signify permanence as well. Although houses can be destroyed by fire, earthquakes, and tornadoes, the utter devastation that families experience at such loss testifies to the permanence we expect of our houses.

How is it that a people who have often been rebellious during their short time in the wilderness are now unified? How can a people who demonstrated their apostasy so recently, by building the Golden Calf, now deserve to be called *Beit Yisrael*?

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, chief rabbi of Efrat, offers a midrash suggesting that the building of the Tabernacle plays a key role in restoring the people’s relationship to God and in unifying the people. Drawing on a mystical metaphor that describes the relationship between God and the Jewish people as a marriage, Riskin sees the Golden Calf as a symbol of the people’s infidelity to God, and the subsequent building of the Tabernacle as the means of restoring their relationship with God. Riskin observes that the greatest tangible expression of their mutual, undying love for each other is the building of the home—the Tabernacle—together. Thus, at the end of Exodus, the people can rightly be called *Beit Yisrael*, the House of Israel, and can rest assured that God’s presence will remain with them throughout their journeys.

Umberto Cassuto comments that when the Torah first uses the term “House of Israel” in Exodus 16:31 (“And the House of Israel called it manna . . .”) it means “not only the children of Israel living at the time, but the whole house of Israel throughout the generations,” (Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* [Magnus Press: Jerusalem, 1987], p. 199). In other words, the term “House of Israel” conveys a timelessness that includes every generation of Jews, not only those who wandered in the wilderness. When the text says “House of Israel,” we are included. So, the use of the term “House of Israel” at the end of Exodus confirms that just as God’s presence is manifest to the Israelites in biblical times “throughout their journeys,” God’s presence will be manifest to all generations of Jews in their journeys. For our ancestors, this manifestation was a cloud by day and fire at night. Our profound challenge today is to identify the manifestations of God that can help guide us on our journeys through life.

So we end Exodus not as *B'nei Yisrael*, but as *Beit Yisrael*. The transformation of the people in the Book of Exodus teaches us how we should grow during the journeys of our lives. As a family, we should always try to evolve from living as individuals toward becoming a household. As a synagogue, we should strive to turn our individual family units into a community. And as a people, we should endeavor to weave our diverse threads into a lovely tapestry. May we be blessed with the strength and endurance to make these journeys.

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COUNTING AND ACCOUNTING

Deborah Joselow

This week's parashah begins with the Hebrew words *Vayakhel Moshe*. In English, this phrase is translated "Moses gathered...." The noun *kehillah*, which means "congregation," is a derivative of the Hebrew verb for "gather." Just as Moses gathered all the people, so, too, we continue to gather today for affirmation and instruction in our own synagogues and temples. As Rabbi Prinz suggests in her commentary, Jewish communities need to be able to count on the integrity and intentions of their leaders. We Jews also need to be vigilant in accounting for the contributions of all of our members, men as well as women.

This Shabbat is called *Shabbat Shekalim*. As the second part of the Torah portion, Pekude, tells us, every adult male Israelite is instructed to contribute a half-shekel toward the building of the sanctuary. Rashi insists that this gold coin is a guilt offering, required only of males in order to atone for their participation in the building of the golden calf. During that incident the Israelite women had refused to contribute their jewelry; as a result they were rewarded with the celebration of Rosh Chodesh. According to Rashi, Jewish women are again distinguished in this week's portion for their moral courage and are, therefore, granted an exemption from the temple-building fund.

In Exodus 38:8, the text states: "He [Bezalel] made the laver of copper and its stand of copper from the mirrors of the women who performed tasks at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting." Rashi identifies this group as the same Israelite women who gave birth to children during their years of slavery in Egypt, thereby insuring the future of the Jewish community. What these women did, despite Pharaoh's decree and their own circumstances, was of the utmost consequence for their own and our own community. Yet, most of these Jewish heroines remain nameless and unknown. Despite their importance, such women did not—and in some venues still do not—count.

March is Women's History Month. Our Torah portion this week reminds us of the importance and influence of Jewish women throughout our people's history. This month in particular I hope that each of you will take the opportunity to account for and celebrate the voices, actions, and contributions of Jewish women in our texts, our traditions, and our communities.

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If You Want Something Done Right, Sometimes You Have to Do It Yourself

Joel N. Abraham

It makes the most sense to start this *d'var* with an explanation about our congregation. Temple Shalom, despite having been in existence for over nine decades, now finds itself in the wilderness. After ninety years in Plainfield, New Jersey, facing some hard demographic realities, our *haimische* congregation decided to sell its physical home and relocate ourselves to a nearby town. Currently, while we look to build our new synagogue, we rent space from a Presbyterian church. This week's portion—with its ritual construction of the Israelites' temporary worship site in their wanderings—has special resonance with us. Each week, we too bring in our ark, set up the lampstands, hang the curtains, and mark out our worship space.

We originally moved to this space in the summer, a slack time in most congregations. Services tend to be more informal, and the expectations of what our "temple" should look like were not as high. But summer becomes fall, and the High Holy Days are an altogether different animal in most congregations. There were concerns that some congregants, who found themselves perhaps more tied to our physical than our spiritual structure, might find experiencing *Kol Nidrei* in a church to be the straw that broke their membership.

I, as the solo rabbi, had spent a great deal of time with the chair of our building committee imagining how we could change an elegant, but (fortunately) plain Presbyterian sanctuary into an appropriate space for five hundred Reform Jews to both usher in the New Year and carry out the process of *t'shuvah*. On the positive side, the building chair had a flair for design and could take my ideas and flesh them out in curtain and riser. On the negative side, there was some concern about the amount of money that was going to be needed to rent all of the necessary items and the time needed to set them up and take them down. In the end, he and I and many other volunteers (including the artist who painted a canvas with a rendition of our old stained glass to hang over the cross) spent hours over each detail. Erev Rosh HaShanah, when most sane Jews are either trying to relax over their family dinners or rushing to prepare them, I found myself pulling at curtains, straightening cloths, and rearranging flowers. Certainly, I had a committee who had very ably pinned those cloths and curtains and set up those flowers, but I knew that nothing that happened after the *Hin'ni* would matter as much as the first impression of each congregant as he or she entered the sacred space.

In our portion this week, Moses seems to be taking on a few responsibilities that might be left to others further down on the organizational chart. He himself places sockets, lifts planks, places tables, lights lamps, and even lights the incense for the debut of the Tabernacle. Up until this point, he has left the work up to Bezalel, Oholiab, and their assistants. Now, however, as the moment comes for the grand opening—we find Moshe Rabbeinu himself rolling up his sleeves and doing it all himself.

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I, myself, am no Moses. But a congregation's rabbi is not alone in feeling that the important details need to be handled personally. When we are critical, we call this tendency "micromanaging." However, the strong sense of responsibility that leaders (volunteer or otherwise) feel to make the worship environment sacred often causes them to leave delegation behind. Just like the temple newsletter, budgetary line items, school curriculum, and other arenas of congregation life, it is no surprise that our most public face—that of worship—is often a matter of intense concern and focus.

On Rosh HaShanah, as members of our congregation entered the narthex (such a nice Jewish word for "lobby"), one could see the trepidation expressed on their faces: What would services be like on the other side of that door, underneath the steeple? Then there followed a pause—and an intake of breath as they beheld the canvas replica of the stained-glass Ten Commandments floating over the white curtains, framed by the silk paintings that had adorned our old bimah, which surrounded our rented ark and came together to form a *mikdash*—a "sanctuary" or "holy space." "Ah," one could hear, "this is right. I can worship here."

Moses was probably smiling as well.

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EXPERIENCING GOD IN THE DARK AND THE LIGHT

Lisa Lieberman Barzilai

Parashah Overview

- Moses teaches the rules of Shabbat. (35:1-3)
- Moses asks the Israelites for a donation of gifts and those who are skilled help build the *Mishkan* [Tabernacle] under the direction of Bezalel and Oholiab. (35:4-38:20)
- A statistical summary of the materials used for the Tabernacle and an account of producing the priestly vestments are recorded. Moses blesses the Israelites for the work they did. (38:21-39:42)
- Upon God's instruction, Moses sets up the *Mishkan* and the priests are anointed and consecrated. (40:1-33)
- A description is given of a cloud that covers the *Mishkan* by day and a fire that burns by night, indicating God's Presence therein. (40:33-38)

Focal Point

When Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of *Adonai* filled the Tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of *Adonai* filled the Tabernacle. When the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on their various journeys; but if the cloud did not lift, they would not set out until such time as it did lift. For over the Tabernacle a cloud of *Adonai* rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all the House of Israel throughout their journeys. (Exodus 40:33-38)

Your Guide I

- How do you think the Israelites felt seeing the Divine Presence fill the Tabernacle?
- Some translations use the word "Glory" or "Majesty" instead of "Presence" for the word *kavod*. Does this alternative translation change the way you view the passage?
- Why couldn't Moses enter the Tent of Meeting? What was really preventing him from entering?
- What is the significance of the Presence appearing as a cloud and fire? When have we seen these symbols before in the Book of Exodus?
- Why did God have to give the Israelites a sign of when to stay encamped and when to set out on their journey?

By the Way

- "The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of *Adonai* filled the Tabernacle." The function of the Tabernacle was to create a portable Sinai, a means by which a continued avenue of communication with God could be maintained. As the people move away from the mount of revelation, they need a visible, tangible symbol of God's ever-abiding Presence in their midst. It is not surprising, then, that the same phenomenon as occurred at Sinai, related in 24:15-17, now repeats itself. It will recur at the dedication of Solomon's Temple, as is narrated in I Kings 8:10-11. The cloud is the manifest token of the immediacy of the Divine Presence. (Nahum Sarna on Exodus 40:34 in *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, p. 237)
- "And the glory of *Adonai* filled the Tabernacle...." The entire Sanctuary was filled with Israel's love and the longing for God, because the Sanctuary and its utensils had come from the people's donations and their strong desire to express

their love of God. As a result, the *Shechinah* rested upon them, filling every single possible place. That is what is meant by "the glory of *Adonai* filled the Sanctuary." (R. Yaakov Aryeh of Radzimin on Exodus 40:34 in *Torah Gems*)

- "Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting...." It is unclear whether entry is literally hindered, or is impermissible, or that he simply dared not enter. (Nahum Sarna on Exodus 40:35 in *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, p.237)
- "Moses was not able to come into the Tent of Meeting" - even to the door, because the cloud covered it, and he was not permitted to come into the cloud. Moreover, "the Glory of the Eternal filled the Tabernacle," so how could he enter it? The reason for this was so that Moses should not go in without permission, but instead God would call him and then he was to come into the midst of the cloud, just as God had done at Mount Sinai. (Ramban)
- At this point, there are two embodiments of holiness in the Israelite camp: the Tent of Meeting (*Ohel Mo-oid*) and the Tabernacle (*Mishkan*). We can think of them as representing a theology of encounter and a theology of presence. There are moments (a wedding, the birth of a child, an escape from danger) when God erupts into our lives with a special intensity that transforms us but that is too intense to be lived constantly. Then there are times when God is a constant presence in our lives (marriage, parenthood, years of good health) in an equally real but less intense manner. The challenge is to recognize God's constant presence in our lives without its becoming so ordinary that we take it for granted. (Benno Jacob on Exodus 40:35 in *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, The Jewish Publication Society, 1999, pp. 571-2)
- "For the cloud of *Adonai* was upon the Sanctuary by day, and fire was on it by night...." This is a lesson for every person. Each person is considered to be like a sanctuary in his own right, and when good fortune shines on him, he should always be aware of the cloud that can come and darken his life. On the other hand, when things are bad and everything is dark around him, he should not despair, because the sun will yet shine for him. (Yalkut Eliezer on Exodus 40:38 in *Torah Gems*)

Your Guide

- Sarna suggests that the cloud allowed the Israelites to constantly feel or notice God's Presence. Is there any symbol or ritual that makes us feel that way today?
- A *b'rit* is that special covenant between God and the Jewish people. Is R. Yaakov Aryeh of Radzimin suggesting that the donations to the Tabernacle and the subsequent Presence of God reflect the renewing of the *b'rit*, or is he proposing that this a new beginning?
- Sarna and the Ramban offer various interpretations as to why Moses was not able to enter the Tent of Meeting. What do you think is the reason and why?
- In the *Etz Hayim* commentary the two holy places in the Israelite camp are likened to the two types of God encounters we experience in our lives: the intense and the ever-present. Why did the Israelites need these two different encounters? Do we, as modern Jews, experience the "theology of encounter" and the "theology of presence"?
- The *Yalkut Eliezer* mentions dark times and good times in our lives. Is this a good way to live our lives?

D'var Torah

Our connection with God often seems elusive. Now several generations have lived through amazing scientific discoveries that allow us to understand so much of our world. Yet, we are not yet able to prove scientifically that God exists. Our ancestors were given a gift: The Israelites were able to experience God's real and awesome might. We do not always see the grand miracles they did. Yet if we choose to see the daily miracles around us and if we work to create a relationship with the Divine, we can also have a special connection with God. Our definition of miracle and God-encounter needs to change from that which the Israelites experienced. Too often we, adolescents and adults alike, are so caught up in needing proof that we do not stop to appreciate what God has provided for us. Perhaps it is time to change the prism we use to perceive God. Of course, like Moses, there will be times when we cannot approach God, either due to obstacles within ourselves or the obstacles God places before us. However, as stated in the *Yalkut Eliezer*, we need to remember God's Presence both in good times and when life seems most difficult. At any moment, our lives can take a turn, for better or for worse. Our job is to experience and appreciate God in our lives on a daily basis and when we have an intense moment with the Divine.

It is interesting that when we started the Book of Exodus, the Israelites were enslaved. God shows us that intense experience of getting the Israelites out of Egypt. Now, at the end of Exodus, God's Presence appears to be a constant for the Israelites. May we all learn to appreciate the presence of God in our lives. *Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazeik*.

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Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazeik.