

Pekudei: KI and the Hero Cycle

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The hero's journey was theorized and popularized in a groundbreaking work by Joseph Campbell half a century ago in his *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Looking at mythologies from around the world, he discerned specific stages that a hero goes through on his quest, going from an initial call to adventure and through an ordeal, experiencing resistance to the quest, and then in the end becoming transformed into the hero who is a "master of two worlds," someone who bridges the natural and supernatural worlds. In the Torah, we can easily identify the hero pattern in the patriarchal narrative in Genesis, and it's clearly evident in the character of Moses as well in Exodus. What makes the hero narrative unique in the context of Torah, however, is that the Israelites themselves, as a people, also fit into the hero pattern. It isn't necessarily a neat or lockstep fidelity to the pattern, but it still fits. The Israelites as a whole are called to adventure. They have become numerous and prosperous in Egypt but it is not their destiny to live there. They are to leave Egypt and go to the Promised Land. But first must go through a series of trials. There is the ordeal of slavery. There are further hardships as they wander in the desert. Another aspect of the hero's journey is divine aid, and there is plenty of that – we have the Crossing of the Reed Sea, the Clouds of Glory, the miraculous provision of water and of manna in the desert.

The hero's journey also includes resistance and refusal to continue, which again we see the Israelites doing quite a bit of. They mutter and murmur and

they generally drive God and Moses crazy. The narrative gets a bit tricky in Exodus because the story doesn't appear to proceed in neat chronological order. We're told about revelation, but then a few chapters later there is a scene with the Golden Calf that arguably takes place before the revelation is communicated to Israel. But to put it into a chronological order for our purposes, what happens is first the nadir of the Exodus narrative, when the Israelites worship the Golden Calf and God initially appears to want to wipe out everyone. Moses breaks the 10 Commandments and there is wholesale slaughter that takes place. And then when 2nd set of tablets is received and the Israelites hear and accept God's commandments, they cross a kind of return threshold, when there is an alignment between the divine forces and the hero.

What happens next is the hero's transformation. I believe it is this stage that is implied by the parshas we read last week and this week, Vayakhel and Pekudei. The Israelites build the Mishkan, and the book of Exodus concludes with the happy resolution that the presence of God now dwells in the midst of Israel. Thus we read, Moses completed the work, and the cloud covered the Tent of the Presence, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. The very last verse of Exodus goes out of its way to tell us that the Israelites could see the glory of God at every stage of their journey. They have collectively become the masters of two worlds, uniting the earthly and divine realms.

So the story of Israel is a hero's journey, and parshat Pekudei rounds out that hero's journey with the otherwise mundane-sounding description of the completion of the Mishkan.

What I want to suggest is that there is a powerful teaching in here for us. If we can successfully re-narrate the story of KI, the story that we are even now in the midst of narrating, after the model of the hero's journey, then we can begin to re-frame the difficult passages that we have experienced as part of a redemption narrative. We can, in other words, re-center optimism, vision, and energy in the story of our community.

In the Torah readings leading up to today, we saw a deeply divided Israelite community. There was a question which direction they would choose to follow. There was the possibility that the community would split apart or be destroyed. So too we might see KI as having been through a loosely parallel situation, albeit much less dramatically. There was a moment of uncertainty and fear over the unity of KI as a community that we collectively experienced as we navigated the question of co-location at Shaarey Zedek. But we have come to the other side of that moment now, a moment that again is roughly parallel to the Torah narrative, in the sense that just as all of Israel then put their individual energies into building the Mishkan, becoming unified as a community in the process, so too are we now tasked with re-dedicating this building as our Mishkan, with the attendant implication that we need to rededicate ourselves to communal unification and transformation.

The ritual that we engaged in as we concluded today’s reading was to call out Hazak, Hazak, v’Nichazek. Be strong, be strong, and we will take strength from you. It’s a closure ritual that is a fitting conclusion to this first part of the national saga, which depicts Israel now united in dedication to a common goal, each having contributed their resources and talents to the fulfillment of that goal. But we also know that the saga is not yet complete, and here is the learning for us. At the moment of completion of a cycle, we might feel exhausted in the very pursuit of that closure. It is at that moment that we need to find the strength to face the challenges that lie ahead. So too have we exhaustingly pursued a process of decision-making about the future of KI. It is precisely now, at this moment of completion of that process, that we need to call out to each other, Hazak Hazak venitchazek—Be strong, be strong, and let us take strength from each other.”