I want to ask two major questions today about Vayakhel-Pekudei, and both of them essentially come down to asking, now that Shemot is over, what was that about? The first flavor of “what was that about” is one I’m sure many of us have thought of before. Why must we listen to this Parshah when it consists mostly of repetition of the descriptions in Terumah-Tetzaveh? This question the Rabbis have a good answer to, and it comes in two pieces. Firstly, Vayakhel-Pekudei describes the actual creation rather than just the instructions, and as such constitutes technically new material. But this explanation is not totally satisfying since we wish to assert omnisignificance. Why not just say “they did that?” Well, the second answer, as described by Rashi in a different context and expounded by the Lubavitcher Rebbe in Likkutei Sichot, is that the Torah constitutes a story that G-d tells us, and therefore G-d dwells on the parts that please them. The Mishkan is the physical proof both that B’nei Yisrael are ready to accept the divine word and that G-d has forgiven them for the events of Ki Tissa. As such, G-d enjoys talking about it at length. This idea that the Torah, this highly-engineered work, has yet room for expression and preference of its narrator is, I think, important for understanding our second question of the day.

So if we are satisfied with the technical question, let’s turn to a more substantive one. Why now? We have just received the Torah in Yitro. We begin to set up a legal system in Mishpatim, and then rather than continue on that project, we take what feels like a massive detour into five parshiyot spent mostly describing objects and rituals, parshiyot where the words are strange and the meanings sometimes obscure. What gives? Why should Terumah through Pekudei be where they are in the Torah?

Now, I’m a mathematician and that means that after phrasing a question, the first thing to do is to check that the question actually makes sense. And one might raise an immediate objection to this question based on the Rabbis’ principle that Ein Mukdam U’M’Ukhar BaTorah, that the Torah cannot be assumed to be given in chronological order. For instance, an example we will need later is that Rashi and Ibn Ezra understand that the episode of Parshat Yitro in which Mosheh is worn out judging the nation, and his father-in-law suggests appointing judges to lighten the load, occurs after Matan Torah despite appearing earlier in the narrative. The logic here is based on some textual clues, together with the idea that it makes sense to have Mosheh judge cases only after having first given the base laws in Mishpatim.

But returning to the question at hand, while in general we cannot infer chronology based on Parshah order, Parshat Terumah repeatedly tells us that Mosheh is to make objects according to how he is shown them “on the mountain.” (e.g. Ex. 25:9, 40, 26:30, 27:8) He therefore must not yet have left Har Sinai. This is further confirmed by the introduction to the story of Egel HaZahav “For Mosheh took so embarrassingly long to descend from the mountain.” (Ex. 32:1, Ki Tissa Sheni).

So we really must ask. If we understand the lengthy descriptions eventually lead B’nei Yisrael to despair of Mosheh’s return and turn to idol worship, why exactly is this G-d’s number 1 priority? Is initiating the sacrificial cult so important? Certainly it had more importance to the ancient Israelites than it would to us today, but we must consider. We’ve just received the Ten Commandments, and now the cost of initiating the sacrificial cult is that B’nei Yisrael will transgress one of those ten. Is this worth it? Couldn’t this have been done later?

I want to suggest an answer to this question today, but first we’ll need to scrutinize what’s actually going on both here and in Parshat Yitro. So for starters, let’s recall what brings Mosheh up the mountain to begin with. B’nei Yisrael receive the Ten Commandments in the sixth Aliyah of Yitro, but the experience is so shaking that in the seventh Aliyah they beg Mosheh to receive the rest of the Torah for them. A midrash recounted in the Talmud Masechet Shabbat Daf 88b imagines that every divine word sunders the people’s souls from their bodies, so that divine dew and angels are repeatedly called from heaven to revive them and return them to the mountain to hear the next word. And so at the end of Yitro and onwards Mosheh goes back to G-d to get those teachings and give them to the Israelites.

So the first detail we will need to keep track of is that the plan was initially for the whole nation to be involved in the receipt of Torah, but this doesn’t work out and so Mishpatim through Pekudei is the alternative plan. The second detail we’ll need to scrutinize is Bezalel in 38:22 “did all that G-d commanded Mosheh,” and my ideas here come from a Chabad.org page of questions and answers. Rashi explains that this phrasing is chosen, rather than “did what Mosheh commanded him,” because Mosheh actually instructed Bezalel to make the vessels for the mishkan, and then the Mishkan itself. But Bezalel interjected that it would make more sense to make first the building and then the stuff to put in it. Why the different order? Well, R. Chaim Aryeh Leib explains that Mosheh was worried about being charged with nepotism for appointing his nephew Itamar to head the project. Therefore, to demonstrate that Bezalel did indeed have divine insight, Mosheh intentionally reversed the instructions, and used Bezalel’s correction to demonstrate to the people Bezalel really was chosen. Another interpretation, this one from She’elot U’T’shuvot Tirosh V’Yitzhar, is based on some technicalities of interpreting a single letter in G-d’s charge to Mosheh. Mosheh does not correctly understand the commandment until Bezalel explains that this seemingly-extra letter comes to indicate which pieces of the construction are to be done first.

That is to say that either by creativity and intuition or by careful understanding, Bezalel participates directly in the interpretation of the word of G-d, supplanting Mosheh’s own instructions. This sounds surprising, but it should not be. After all, Mosheh has received detailed descriptions, together with images, of what is to be made, but Bezalel and the other Chochmei Lev have not. They can only hear Mosheh’s descriptions, perhaps see Mosheh’s presumably meager sketches, and interpret. And this provides out second key piece in answering the question of why the Mishkan and its instructions are needed right now, and why right after Mishpatim?

Well, I suggest that Shemot is split into Exodus, Revelation, and further instructions, but that that third act ought to be understood beginning with Mosheh judging the people at Sinai. That is, the third act begins with the chronological end of Parshat Yitro, and then includes the last 6 parshiyot. Why? Because after the people distance themselves from revelation at the end of Yitro, everything onwards represents G-d’s new approach to the original goal. Instead of direct revelation drawing the nation into the shared work of Torah, G-d goes at it through these nameless Chochmei Lev, elders, and judges. People who will by their nature and training and tasks begin to model what involvement with Torah looks like.

If you believe me when I posit that artistic interpretation was involved in making the Mishkan, then how can it be that “it was done as was commanded Mosheh”, which we are told many times in Pekudei. To answer this question I’d like to bring in a Chasidic story. In “Magid Meisharim”, R. Yosef Karo, tells a collection of stories related to his discussions with his Magid, some kind of angelic figure he has access to. One night, he stays up late obsessing over some complex and technical point of law, coming to a brilliant resolution of a difficult text. Side note: he doesn’t actually tell us what the point of law is, and one wonders whether he worried we might judge that the matter was not so complicated and technical as he found it. But anyway he resolves the matter and goes to sleep, only to be in Yeshiva the next day and hear his very explanation out of the mouth of a Yeshiva boy, who apparently intuited the meaning from the text immediately. So he asks his Magid what has happened. How can he, the author of Beit Yosef, Kesef Mishneh, and Shulchan Aruch, a great scholar and mystic, how can he have struggled so mightily to come to a realization that a child picked up on immediately? And his Magid responds that it is only because R. Karo has understood the matter that it became available to the schoolchild. Once R. Karo figured it out, this matter went from a matter of Torah Nistar, the concealed Torah that is available only through great difficulty and learning, to a matter of Torah Nigleh, the revealed Torah that everyone can understand from the text. In this way, R. Karo was simultaneously the creator, discoverer, and agent of revelation.

In much the same way, the work of Bezalel and the Chochmei Lev in Vayakhel-Pekudei is an act of creation and interpretation, but also of discovery and revelation. Upon their completion of each work, we are told that this was what was as had been commanded, just as R. Karo came up with an explanation that was simultaneously new and had been a matter of Torah since the beginning of creation. The judges, and the Chochmei Lev, and R. Karo are involved in creating new Torah, just as there is no new Torah nor can there ever be.

It is an interesting point that the plural of Torah, in reference to the physical object, is not, G-d forbid, Torahtot. We do not have more than one Torah. The plural is Sifrei Torah, Torah Scrolls. The scrolls are plural. The Torah is singular, unified. One story carried and duplicated, written on books and manuscripts, works of scholars from thousands of years ago, oral tradition passed down for generations, and works of us here when we discuss and come up with new ideas that were in the Torah to begin with since Creation began. The scrolls change. The ideas change. The approaches change. The central essence of Torah, that stays.

We in this community find ourselves in a position not dissimilar from that of Bezalel in Vayakhel-Pekudei, and Yosef Karo in Magid Meisharim, and even dare we say, G-d at the end of Parshat Yitro. Our Torah scrolls are at the end of their usable lives. We have the same challenges and opportunities that face each of these characters: renew and reimagine and make changes that reveal what has always been the same. We are now in the process of scribing what is, in physical terms, a new Torah scroll, just as we are constantly in the process of making what is, in human terms, new Torah insight. Just as the Torah makes room for the innovations of scholars and elders and artists, and for G-d-as-storyteller’s creative embellishments, so too has it room for our participation. And so we too are faced with the question: In what way do we wish to engage in Torah? How do we wish to contribute? What is the portion of the work that we have been given to do?