

8th Annual Refugee Shabbat Sermon Resources



Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei Themes and Content

This resource is intended to aid sermon-writing for Refugee Shabbat using the foundation of Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei – the Torah portion on Refugee Shabbat March 13th-14th, 2026. Below are suggested themes, supporting texts, contemporary context and recommended actions that may be useful as you construct your Refugee Shabbat message.

Theme 1: The Poles for Carrying the Ark Shall Not Be Removed: The Sacred Reminder of Migration

The construction of the ark is complete only once the poles are added in to transport it. But we are instructed never to remove the poles even once the ark is settled. This reminder of our experience of migration is forever linked to this most sacred source of instruction for our people. When we look up on the ark and carry out the commandments, we do so through the lens of our experience being forced to wander. (Supporting texts and commentary on page 2)

Theme 2: Bezalel and Oholiav: A National Project Built on Integrating People of Different Origins

Bezalel and Oholiav – The projects leaders appointed to construct the *mishkan* (tabernacle) – our most important national project as we wander in the desert, originate from perhaps the two most disparate tribes and classes. Both are essential to the project of building the people and the nation. Their intentional inclusion finds an echo in the American motto “*e pluribus unum* – out of many, one” and the American narrative of a nation strengthened by embracing all its inhabitants regardless of their background. (Supporting texts and commentary on page 3)

Contemporary Context: HIAS Policy Platforms and Statements of Jewish Values

- HIAS Policy Platform: What a Secure, Humane, Functioning Immigration Systems Looks Like

Recommended Follow-Up Actions for Your Congregation

- Supporting Immigrant Neighbors in Your City: Resources for Synagogues and Clergy

Theme 1 Supporting Content: The Poles Shall Not Be Removed From the Ark

Exodus 37:4-5 of *Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei* tells of the completion of the ark's construction – which can only be achieved after the poles for its carrying are added.

וַיַּעֲשֵׂה בְּנֵי עָזִי שְׂطִים וַיַּאֲפַת אֹתָם זָהָב: וַיְבִיא אֶת-הַבְּرִיכִים בַּטְבָעָת עַל צְלָעָת הַאֲרוֹן לְשַׁאת אֶת-הָאָרוֹן:
He made poles of acacia wood, overlaid them with gold, and inserted the poles into the rings on the side walls of the ark for carrying the ark.

These verses connect to an earlier commandment in Exodus 25:12-15 in which the text explicitly forbids the removal of the poles from the ark:

וְעַשֵּׂת בְּנֵי עָזִי שְׂטִים וְצְפִית אֹתָם זָהָב: וְהַבָּאת אֶת-הַבְּרִיכִים בַּטְבָעָת עַל צְלָעָת הַאֲרוֹן בָּהֶם: בַּטְבָעָת
הַאֲרוֹן יִהְיֶה הַבְּרִיכִים לֹא יִקְרֹר מִמֶּנּוּ:
Make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold; then insert the poles into the rings on the side walls of the ark, for carrying the ark. The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark: they shall not be removed from it.

This prohibition in the overall construction of the *mishkan* stands out. Only the ark and its poles (along with the breast plate and the ephod) are never to be dismantled (See discussion in Babylonian Talmud: Yoma 72a).

Steinsaltz on Exodus 25:15

In the rings of the ark the staves shall be; they shall not be removed from it: The staves of the ark are not merely a means for carrying it, they are an integral part of the ark. Consequently, they may not be removed from the rings even when they are not needed for transporting the ark.

The Significance of the Laws Governing the Design of the Mishkan

Rabbi Bernie Fox Expanding on the Commentary of Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon

The Ark was constructed in the wilderness and was transported as the nation traveled. Therefore, the Aron (ark) was constructed so that it could be carried. However, this design was not merely a practical necessity. The portability of the Ark was essential to its very definition. In other words, the Ark was defined as a “portable” item. The Aron could only be considered perfect when it expressed this definition. Even at rest the Ark was required to conform to this definition. It must remain completely portable. For this reason, the Aron of the permanent Bait HaMikdash (Temple) remained unchanged in design. The poles were part of the design and could not be removed.

Seeing Our Torah Through the Lens of Migration

HIAS Rabbi in Residence Sarah Bassin

When we look at the ark – the container of our sacred knowledge – we cannot avoid the memory of migration. We are meant to be confronted with the poles used to carry this vessel even as it remains unmoved for centuries. If we attempt to understand the contents of the ark without the lens of our experience of migration, we fail to grasp it at all. Our experience of the totality of Torah must be filtered through the memory of migration and the sacred responsibilities that history demands.

Theme 2 Supporting Content: The Disparate Origins of Bezalel and Oholaiav

The leaders of the construction of the *mishkan* (tabernacle) are identified earlier in Exodus 31 with their tribal affiliation named. Bezalel is from the prominent tribe of Judah; Oholiav is from the peripheral tribe of Dan. Again in this Torah portion, these affiliations are front and center along with the skills they bring in Exodus 35:30-35. Rabbinic commentary and midrash understand their selection from disparate factions of society to be deliberate.

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רְאוּ כֹּרֶא יְהָה בְּשָׁם בְּצַלְאֵל בְּרוּחָה לְמַעַת יְהָהוָה: וַיָּמָלֵא אָתָּה רֹום אֱלֹהִים בְּחִכְמָה בְּתִבְונָה וּבְקַעַת וּבְכָל-מַלְאָכָה: וַיָּחַשׁ מְחֻשָּׁבָת לְעֵשֶׂת בְּזָבָב וּבְכָסָף וּבְנָקָשָׁת: וּבְתְּרָשָׁת אָתָּה לְמַלְאָת וּבְחַרְשָׁת עַז לְעֵשָׂות בְּכָל-מְלָאכָת מְחֻשָּׁבָת: וְלֹהֶרֶת גְּנוּמָה בְּלֹבֶה הוּא וְאַקְהִיל אָב בְּרוּא חִיסָּמָה לְמַטָּה-זָן: מְלָא אָתָּם קָכָמָה-לְבָב לְעֵשָׂות כָּל-מְלָאכָה חָרֵשׁ וְחַשׁ וּרְאֵם בְּתִכְלָת וּבְאַרְגָּמָן בְּתִולָּעָת כְּשָׂנִי וּבְשָׁשׁ וּאַרְגָּעִיל כָּל-מְלָאכָה וּחַשְׁבִּי מְחֻשָּׁבָת:

And Moses said to the Israelites: See, 'ה' has singled out by name Bezalel, son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, endowing him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft, and inspiring him to make designs for work in gold, silver, and copper, to cut stones for setting and to carve wood—to work in every kind of designer's craft—and to give directions. He and Oholiav son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan have been endowed with the skill to do any work—of the carver, the designer, the embroiderer in blue, purple, crimson yarns, and in fine linen, and of the weaver—as workers in all crafts and as makers of designs.

Rashi on Exodus 35:34

And Oholiav — he was of the tribe of Dan, of one of the lowest of the tribes, of the sons of the handmaids, and yet the Omnipresent placed him with regard to the work of the Tabernacle on a level with Bezalel although he was a member of one of the noble tribes (Judah) in order to confirm what Scripture says in Job 34:19 “God regards not the rich more than the poor” (Midrash Tanchuma 2:10:13).

Ibn Ezra on Exodus 35:34

Ohliab was Bezalel's colleague (equal) in all the crafts and in the skill of teaching to others.

Shemot Rabba 40:4

Rabbi Ḥanina said: The great and the lowly are equal. A person should never forsake his strength. **A person should not think that he cannot be strengthened and aided by an individual of humble lineage.* The Tabernacle was crafted by these two tribes, and likewise the Temple [was constructed by] Solomon from Judah, and Ḥiram “son of a widowed woman from the tribe of Naphtali” (I Kings 7:14).

Integration as the Foundation for Our National Project

HIAS Rabbi in Residence Sarah Bassin

The construction of our portable worship space was a project in national identity building at its heart. The inclusion of the most disparate factions of society was both deliberate and essential. It succeeded because it harnessed the gifts and ingenuity of people regardless of their origin or social station. That same logic undergirds the motto of the United States: “*e pluribus unum* – out of many, one.” At our most aspirational, our nation proclaims that deliberate inclusion is our foundation. And it’s not an overstatement to declare that our national success hinges upon our embrace of this truth. In an era in which polarization and dehumanization dominate our political discourse, we not only harm the most vulnerable in society, we diminish our sense of a national identity that can navigate difference. As in the Torah, we thrive when we harness the gifts and ingenuity of people regardless of their identity and origin and enable their integration not only into society but into the story we tell about ourselves.