

Shabbat Parashat Vayak'hel-P'kudei/Shabbat Parah
Hiddur Mitzvah – The Beautification of Jewish Ritual

As we concentrate on this final *parasha*/weekly Torah reading of *Seifer Sh'mot* (read as a combined double *parasha*), it is difficult not to raise the question of why, after having already provided in vivid detail the instructions for the construction and crafting of the *Mishkan*/Desert Tabernacle and its associated ritual objects, the Torah chooses to repeat all of these details again in its description of the actual building process this week. Why not simply say something similar to, “And Moses, the craftsmen, and all of Israel did as God commanded.” In fact, this type of summary appears in other verses of the Torah to inform readers that God’s commands were followed. As our tradition teaches, nothing is superfluous or redundant in the Torah. Therefore, there must be a specific lesson being taught by the repetition and reappearance of all these details...

In connection with the performance of *mitzvot*, the Rabbis encourage us to adopt a value that is called “*hiddur mitzvah*,” the beautification of a commandment. When selecting an etrog for the celebration of Sukkot, for example, select one that is large, full of color, and aromatic. When preparing for the *kiddush* in honor of Shabbat or a festival, pour your wine or grape juice into an elegantly crafted *kiddush* cup. When selecting a pair of *t'filin*, choose large boxes with more carefully scripted texts on the inside. Light your Hanukkah candles in a beautiful *Hanukkiyah*. When chanting a prayer or song, do so with the most beautiful melody as possible. When preparing for Shabbat, set the table with a white tablecloth and your best dishes and dress in “Shabbat” clothes. And the list goes on. It is clear that not only are the *mitzvot* valued in and of themselves, but there is also an emphasis placed on an aesthetic effort that can be put into the preparation for and performance of them. It is this lesson that serves as one of the reasons for the acts of craftsmanship and construction being fully described again in this week’s *parasha*. The details remind us not simply to leap into the activity of Jewish ritual, but to put thought, consideration, time, and resources into their performance so that they can be more deeply appreciated. Rituals are meant to reach our souls and, sometimes, an aesthetic touch is what is needed in order for them to succeed in doing so. The more effort that is put into a ritual, the more important it becomes to the individual and the more meaning will result from its fulfillment. In addition, beautification is according to personal taste. While one may desire to fulfill this charge using silver and gold, another may prefer earthenware or glass. Therefore, *hiddur mitzvah* becomes a way to personalize the tradition and take ownership of it without judgment or prejudice. An elegant ritual object or beautifully sung text is something to be proud of and we should take pride in however it is that we perform the rituals of our tradition.

May we all take this last *parasha* of *Seifer Sh'mot*/the Book of Exodus as a charge to make beautiful our celebrations of Jewish life in the spirit of the effort and art that characterized the construction and assembly of the *Mishkan*!

For those interested in answering this call, may I recommend the book [Jewish Holiday Style](#) by Rita Milos Brownstein. You will find it useful and meaningful.

Shabbat Shalom!