

Thinking Torah

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Vayakhel-Pikudei: Mishkan and Creation

Our Parsha opens with the Mitzvah of Shabbat. The question is "why?" What do I mean? Well, the Jews have already been commanded to keep Shabbat, not once but on FOUR different occasions in the Book of Exodus¹. Why would a further time be necessary?

THE MITZVA OF SHABBAT

Shabbat is a mitzvah that is basic and fundamental to everything that Judaism stands for. After all, Shabbat straddles the divide between the world of Bein Adam LaMakom (laws between man and God) and the world of Bein Adam Lechavero (social laws).

On the one hand Shabbat is a symbol of God's creation of the world:

"For six days God made the heavens and earth, the sea and all that is in it and rested on the seventh day." (Shemot 20:11)

On the other hand Shabbat is rooted in the experience of the Exodus and acts as a symbol of freedom, a day on which all of God's creations engage in rest:

"Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God, you shall not do any work - you, your son or your daughter, your male and female slave, your ox or your ass, or any of your cattle ... **Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt** and the Lord your God freed you from there with a mighty hand ... **therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.**" (Devarim 5:13-15)

SHABBAT - MISHKAN.

In reading the topic of the Mishkan in recent weeks, we cannot help but observe an unusual but consistent connection between Shabbat and the Mishkan. This linkage emerges through Chumash in three very clear ways:

- i. Explicitly through the Biblical Text
- ii. The structure of the parshiot
- iii. The Halakhic definition of Shabbat.

I. BIBLICAL TEXT

As we have noted, Shabbat appears in a variety of contexts in Torah. But there are certain places where Shabbat and

¹ 16:23, 20:7-10, 23:12, 31:13-17. This, in addition to the teaching at Marah [15:25] where according to Midrash we learn that the Jews were also commanded to keep Shabbat. [See Sanhedrin 56a, Rashi 24:3.]

Mishkan (or mikdash) are deliberately interlinked:

"You shall keep my Sabbaths and venerate my Mikdash, I am the Lord." (Vayikra 19:30)

And this is repeated:

"You shall keep my Sabbaths and venerate my Mikdash" (Vayikra 26:2)

Why is it does the Torah twin the Mishkan and Shabbat? What is the nature of the affinity here?

II. THE STRUCTURE OF THE PARSHIOT

The parshiot of the Mishkan are structured in the following way:

Chap 25-31	The command to build the <i>Mishkan</i>
31:12-17	Shabbat
Chap 32-34	<i>Egel Hazahav</i> (Golden Calf) and the subsequent renewal of the covenant
35:1-3	Shabbat
Chap 35-40	Moses's command and the construction of the <i>Mishkan</i> .

Here we have a clear and simple chiasmic structure (a-b-c-b-a) that places the Egel at the centre and the Mishkan at the extremes. But what is Shabbat doing here? Why is Shabbat so intimately connected to the story of the Egel-Mishkan²? There must be a link!

III. THE HALAKHIC DEFINITION OF SHABBAT.

Here is really one of the most interesting of connections. Our parsha begins:

"Six days do melacha (work) and the seventh day shall be for you holy, a Shabbat Shabbaton for God; whoever does melacha (work) shall be put to death. Do not burn fire in all your habitations on the Shabbat day." [Exodus 35:2-3]

We may reduce these verses to two central ideas:

- 1) a prohibition against a certain type of work, called "melacha", and
- 2) a prohibition against the use of fire.

Some questions arise immediately: What is "melacha"? Why is fire excluded from the category of "melacha" and mentioned separately?

The Talmud notes that the word "melacha" is a most critical word in the Torah section that describes the construction of the Mishkan! [for example 35:21, 35:31, 35:33, 35:35, 36:1, 36:2, 36:3, 36:4, 36:5, 36:6, 36:7, 36:8] Likewise the word "Melacha"

² We might raise a suggestion, that Shabbat is connected to the Egel (Golden Calf) story and not to the Mishkan. After all, if Shabbat is about belief in God, and the Egel is about idolatry, then Shabbat would seem an appropriate mitzva to place surrounding the Egel story. I shall go in a different direction however, and see Shabbat as connected more to the Mishkan aspect of the order of parshiot (semikhat parshiot) than the Egel.

is the key phrase when Moses teaches the laws of Shabbat observance. In fact the Gemara in Masechet Shabbat deduces the number 39 for the 39 melachot on Shabbat from the 39 occurrences of the word "Melacha" in the story of the Mishkan!

The close linguistic connection and creates a linkage, a "word-play" that suggests a deeper relationship between Shabbat and the Mishkan. Out of all the possible options for defining the term "melacha" the Mishkan seems to be an obvious candidate.

Chazal took things a step further and applied the Shabbat-Mishkan connection to the TYPES of construction work performed in the Mishkan. Hence, the legal definition of Shabbat - carrying, writing, cooking, weaving etc. - takes its legalistic definition based upon the Mishkan. In a word, **the melacha prohibited on Shabbat is the very same melacha used in constructing the Mishkan.**

So, now, from three perspectives, we have reinforced the connection between Mishkan and Shabbat. We have to understand the source of this connection.

MISHKAN - CREATION

We know that Shabbat is linked to creation. As we mentioned in our opening lines, the first Shabbat WAS the Shabbat of creation, when God rested after six days. Shabbat is brought in the Torah with the explicit aim of reminding us of creation God says:

"It shall be a sign for all time between me and the people of Israel, that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and on the seventh day, he ceased from work .." (31:17)

But there is likewise, a linkage between Mishkan and creation. This link is more subtle, but it is reinforced through textual parallel and through midrashic themes. In a minute, we will develop these themes, but at this stage, let us simply note that if these connections are true, we have an interesting triad of themes, or rather a connecting cycle of themes:

CREATION - SHABBAT - MISHKAN - CREATION

We have an ongoing circle of interconnected ideas. Let us first establish the MISHKAN-CREATION link and then we will have to move on to a further stage; the question of significance. (If you want to read an excellent article on this topic, which I have used in my preparation for this shiur, see Nehama Leibowitz on Parshat Teruma, "Make me a sanctuary for me to dwell in." (the second article) see pg. 475-483)

1. CHOCHMA, TEVUNA, DAAT: Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer 3

"In ten sayings the world was created .. and in three it was finalised. And these are they: Chochma, Tevuna and Da'at; as it is stated: 'The Lord in Chochma founded the earth, by Tevuna established the heavens, by his Da'at the depths were split asunder.' (Mishlei / Proverbs 3:19-20) With the same three, the Mishkan was made, as it states (about Betzalel the craftsman for the Mishkan): 'I have filled him with the spirit of God, in Chochma, Tevuna and Da'at.' (Shemot 31:3) With the same three qualities the Temple was built; 'His mother was from Naftali, his father from Tyre, and he was filled with Chochma, tevuna and Da'at.' (I Melachim 7:14)"

The implication here is quite clear. The qualities of building the

Mishkan are the same qualities with which the world was created. Or maybe we can rephrase that. The creative power needed for the Mishkan is identical to the God's creative power. There is some creativity in the Mishkan which is the same as that of the creation of the world.

2. TEXTUAL PARALLELS:

a. The root "A-SS-A"

The root "A-SS-A" and more specifically the word "Vaya'as" - and he made, is used throughout the creation chapter (see 1:7,16,25) and is also mentioned over 200 times (!) in the "making" of the Mishkan.

b. The phrases of completion in both events are identical:

"The heavens and earth were FINISHED (veyechulu hashamayim ve'ha'aretz) ... and God FINISHED his WORK which he had made." (Bereshit 2¹-2)

Likewise with the Mishkan:

"Thus was FINISHED all the WORK of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting ... and Moses FINISHED the work." (Shemot 39:32-40:33)

c. Here is a third literary parallel. God observes his work and remarks upon it that it conforms to plan. God does this seven times in Bereshit, proclaiming that the world is "good" or "very good."

"And God SAW everything that he had made and BEHOLD it was very good, And God BLESSED the seventh day" (Bereshit 1,31. 2,3)

likewise with the Mishkan, Moshe also observes and comments upon the work of the Mishkan. He cannot claim that it is "very good". Instead he comments that it is exactly according to God's plan.

"And Moses SAW all the work, and BEHOLD they had done it as the Lord had commanded ... and Moses blessed them." (Shemot 39:43)

QUESTIONS

What are the meanings of these parallels? What is the nature of the MISHKAN -CREATION ; SHABBAT - MISHKAN link?

FINISHING GOD'S CREATION

Maybe we can suggest the following idea. God in six days created the world. He created a world that was built from mineral, vegetable and animal elements. At the pinnacle of it all is man. Man created in God's image is placed in the world with a certain responsibility. Man is told that he is to "work and protect" the world. How does man do this? What is man's role in the world?

An interesting Midrash raises a possibility:

"A statement of Reish Lakish ... God told Israel; if you accept the Torah, all well and good. But if you do not, I will revert the world to chaos ("Tohu VaVohu" - see Bereshit 1:2)" (Shabbat 68a)

This Talmudic Midrash proposes a fundamental principle. It would seem that the very existence of the world is contingent upon Israel's acceptance of Torah. The world before its creation is described as Tohu Vavohu. If the Torah is not accepted by

Am Yisrael, God is simply going to re-boot the system, wiping out the entire history of the universe. Why? Putting it another way, we will say that the world is created for a reason. The aim of creation is that it be infused with spirituality, with Godliness. And the Torah embodies that Godliness. God says; If Israel will not accept the Torah, then we might as well end the entire enterprise that we call planet earth. Why? Because Israel are being given the opportunity to inject the spirit into the material world. If they refuse, then the entire plan collapses.

Here is the beginning of the answer about the Mishkan-creation link. The act of bringing spirituality into the world, is in itself, an act of creation, for, in essence, the act of spiritualising the world, is part and parcel of giving the world its "higher" purpose. When Israel accept Torah, they bring the creation a step forward.

Likewise, when the Mishkan is built; the Mishkan is an enterprise whereby human beings establish a place for God on earth. With all the philosophical inconsistencies contained in this concept,³ we are talking about an entity which gives God a foothold (so to speak!) - "Make for me a sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst."(Shemot 25:7) . This act of bringing God into the world is the ultimate expression of our "completion" of the creation. It is creative act in that the presence of God is now intensified and may some day dominates our world⁴. Simply put, the establishment of the Mishkan, continues the process of creation 2000 years earlier. The work of infusing the world with the spirit, is its creation. The physical work of creation has been done, but God expects man to do the rest of the work - the spiritual element.

It is interesting how the ideas escalate here.

Shabbat is the spiritual culmination of creation; a TIME for God after the physical creation. The Mishkan is a PLACE for God and spirituality within the physical world. It to is created from mineral, vegetable and animal elements and it houses the presence of God. The *chidush* is that our act of erecting the Mishkan, is the continuation of creation. In fact, it is the perfection of creation.

THE CONCEPT OF TZIMTZUM.

Tzimtzum is a Kabbalistic concept that has somehow become quite well known even in non-Kabbalistic circles. What is Tzimtzum? Broadly put, the theory goes something like this:

God, prior to the existence of the world, filled everything. God was everything! Where was there "room" for the non-Godly in this view of things? How was there "space" for a world? God decided to make space, to pull Himself back and to reveal a space which was "not God". This act of contraction is known as "Tzimtzum." God was everything. He needed to withdraw in order to generate an area that was "not God" so as to facilitate the World's existence.

But on Shabbat, God re-enters the world. Why? Because on Shabbat, humans (Israel) cease being creative. On Shabbat, we cease engaging in creative action. We surrender our rights to utilise the raw materials in the world and to use our technology and ingenuity in order to further our civilisation. We return the gift of creativity to God, the Ultimate Creator. In that way, on Shabbat, we invite God back into the world. In Kabbalat Shabbat, we do not only welcome Shabbat, we

welcome God's overwhelming intensity, to flood into a world, which he has "made room" for by his own self-contraction.⁵

HAR SINAI AND THE MISHKAN

How does all this relate to the Mishkan? On a basic level, I would say that, in the same way in which Shabbat invites God to rejoin our world, the mishkan also invites God to join man. It makes "space" for God's intense presence upon earth.

This can be illustrated by a striking analogy which can be found at the close of our Parsha.

At the moment of revelation at Mount Sinai, God entered the world. Rashi describes the process in a similar manner to the way in which we have described God's presence within the Mishkan:

"GOD DESCENDED UPON MT. SINAI: Is it possible that God physically descended upon the mountain? Does it not state 'I spoke to you from the heavens.' (20:19)? But, this teaches us that God softened and maneuvered the contours of the upper and lower heavens so that they rested upon Har Sinai like a quilt rests upon a bed. Then, God's throne descended over them." (Rashi on Shemot 19:20)

Rashi's problem is technical. How can God speak from heaven and at the same time be considered to have rested his presence upon the Mountain? Rashi finds a solution. The mountain itself became the meeting point of heaven and earth.

When Moses wishes to ascend the mountain to receive the Luchot, the Torah states:

"And Moses ascended the mountain ... and GOD'S PRESENCE rested upon Mt. Sinai, and the CLOUD enveloped it for six days, AND HE CALLED TO MOSES on the seventh day from the cloud ... and Moses entered the cloud and ascended the mountain" (24:15-18)

These pesukim are mirrored in the closing verses of our Parsha:

"The CLOUD covered the tent of meeting, and GOD'S PRESENCE filled the Mishkan. And Moses could not enter the tent of meeting for the cloud rested upon it, and the presence of God filled the Mishkan... AND GOD CALLED TO HIM.." (40:34-5 and Vayikra 1:1)

With this parallel, we see God's presence at Sinai and his presence at the Mishkan described in most remarkable parity. It would seem that God's presence within the Mishkan is the same intensity of presence that appeared on Mount Sinai at Matan Torah.

What is the meaning of this comparison?

A PERPETUAL MT. SINAI

There is one major difference between God's presence on Sinai and his presence at the Mishkan. Matan Torah is a "one time only" event. Once in history, there was a revelation. However the Mishkan is an everyday event. God's presence is manifest in the Mishkan at all times. Nachmanides, however,

³ Does God need a home? Can a physical structure contain God? - see Shlomo's Tefilla in I Kings 8:27

⁴ Isaiah 2:1-5

⁵ Thanks to Rabbi Ari Kahn for this idea

takes up this idea in his introduction to Parshat Teruma.

"The essence (sod) of the Mishkan is thus: The Divine presence that rested upon Mt. Sinai, will now rest in the Mishkan in a more discreet form... the presence of God that appeared at Mt. Sinai was with Israel for eternity in the form of the Mishkan and when Moses entered (the Mishkan) he received the selfsame Divine voice (or word) that had spoken to him at Mt. Sinai " (commentary to 25:1)

Nachmanides proceeds to demonstrate a series of parallels between the Mishkan and the revelation experience at Mt. Sinai.

At Sinai: "The CLOUD covered the mountain, and GOD'S PRESENCE rested upon Mt. Sinai" (24:16).

The Mishkan: "The CLOUD covered the tent of meeting, and GOD'S PRESENCE filled the Mishkan."

At Sinai: "From the heavens he let you HEAR his VOICE" (Devarim 4:36)

The Mishkan: "And he HEARD the VOICE ... from between the Keruvim" (Bamidbar 7:89)

We have already mentioned other parallels. The central idea here is quite incredible. On Mt. Sinai God "descended" to earth. He rested his holy presence amongst man. The Mishkan, likewise, is God's instruction to us, whereby we can bring God down to earth so that He lives amongst us.

CONCLUSIONS

Now our strands fit together. Just like Shabbat is a process of bringing God back into the world, the Mishkan brings God back into the world.

But in essence, this is the ultimate act of creation. God, who made a world in which he is absent, looks to man to call upon the name of God. In the Mishkan, we perfect the creation by bringing God back into the world.

Shabbat Shalom