

# Parshat Teruma: Mishkan and Ohel

The Mishkan is the place in which man meets God. Many fundamental ideas within the God-man encounter are encoded within the intricate details of this portable sanctuary. Hence, our quest is to dig deep above and beyond the measurements and dimensions of Parshat Teruma, to understand the ideas behind the Mishkan itself.

In our shiur last year, we focused upon the role of the "aron" (Ark of the covenant) and we compared its role as opposed to the central altar or mizbeach. This year, we will look at the special triple covering that was placed as a roof over the Mishkan structure. We shall soon see that these simple coverings hide some rather important messages for us.

## Chavruta Study:

1. BASIC: THE STRUCTURE OF THE PARSHA/THE MSHKAN.
  - Go through the parsha listing the various items of the Mishkan which are described.
  - Try to identify a scheme /logic as to the way our parsha is structured.CLUE: Kodesh kodoshim, Kodesh, Azara (outer courtyard).

2. In our shiur, we are going to be talking about the coverings for the Mishkan.  
See Chap 26:1-14.
  - Identify each of the three coverings:
  - What were their names?
  - What materials did they consist of?
  - Were they all visible to the casual observer?

## Shiur :

### THREE COVERINGS

There are three coverings over the "tent" (containing the kodesh and the kodesh kodashim): The Mishkan, the Ohel and the Michseh La'Ohel (26:1-14).

The first cover is a weave of rich threads woven in cherub patterns. Ten strips of material are woven which are then sewn together (5 strips are sewn together) to produce two very large (42 ft x 30 ft) pieces of fabric. These two pieces are joined together by 50 gold clasps that fasten the two sheets. This is laid as the "ceiling" of the Mishkan.

On top of this is the Ohel. It is slightly larger and therefore it entirely covers the covering below it. This covering is made from goats hair - much like the Bedouin tents that one can see in various places in the desert nowadays. Once again these strips of fabric (eleven this time) are sewn into two "sheets" of material and then fastened by 50 copper clasps. Notice how the Ohel consists of cheaper, more ordinary materials in comparison to the Mishkan cloth.

The third covering lies on the top of the other two. However,

whereas the other cloths drape completely over the sides of the Mishkan, covering its walls, this cloth lies on the horizontal only. It lies only "above" i.e. on the top of the Mishkan. It is made from rare animal skins (the translations vary ... rams? dolphins? seals? unicorns?) and was apparently an exceptionally rare commodity.

The phraseology here is informative. After all, two key words are used here: Mishkan and Ohel. Both are used in other places to describe the Tabernacle. When we think about these very different terms, we might emerge with very different connotations. The word Mishkan is an expression of God's dwelling amongst Am Yisrael: "Make me a Mikdash and I will dwell (veSHaKHaNti) amongst them." (25:7) We sometimes talk of Mishkan Ha'edu (28:21) - the Mishkan as a testimony [1]. The "Ohel", however, is frequently found as Ohel Moed - a place for the meeting between man and God. Are these words indicative of different functions of the Mishkan? Is one meaning more intense than the other? Does one word indicate an "inner covering" and the other word, an "outer covering"? This question is one that I have wondered about for quite a while and I have no firm answer to. I let you think about this one for yourselves.

### CONNECTING WORLDS

There are those who have wished to see some deeper significance in these coverings. I bring one example from the Kli Yakar - one of the classic homiletic commentaries on chumash. The Kli Yakar talks about the bottom Mishkan covering with its ten strips of cloth making two sections joined by clasps. He notices that the connection point between the sections falls exactly at the entrance to the Holy of Holies, thus one section is limited to the outer area of the sanctuary and one is exclusively in contact with the Kodesh Kodashim. He says:

"...The mishkan structure is built corresponding to the world itself. Hence it is made from ten pieces of cloth to symbolise the ten utterances [2] with which the world (all worlds) was created.

Through the fifty clasps the higher world joins the lower world, for five of the cloths correspond to the first five of the ten commandments (dealing with God) and the other five (dealing with society) correspond to the lower world ... Ponder on the fact that the dividing curtain between the kodesh and the kodesh kodashim lies directly underneath these fifty clasps ...

Man being a hybrid of the Godly connected to the physical body is the very means by which the upper world might become connected to the lower world. It is he who can create peace between the worlds ... that there be no resistance between them. ... the Temple too is in the place which can join together heaven and earth for that is the very place in which God has established His abode in the lower world. Yaakov saw in his vision of the ladder - a ladder planted in the ground with its top reaching the heavens - how the mid-point of the ladder was aligned with the site of the Temple. ...Likewise in this holy structure, we find combinations of extremes and that is the idea of the fifty clasps which connect the cloths; five over the Kodesh Kodashim, representing the upper worlds and five over the Kodesh which is representative of the lower world all clasped together. This is what Chazal said (Yerushalmi Megilla 1:12) that the clasps appeared in the ceiling of the Mishkan as stars in the night-time sky; because stars represent a middle world between the lower and higher worlds..." [3]

This interpretation is somewhat Kabbalistic and rather complex, but it gives us some idea as to how the symbolism of these sections of the Mishkan have been analysed.

## OHEL MOED / MISHKAN HA'EDUT

Rav Yaakov Medan suggests a different understanding of the two coverings: the Mishkan, and the Ohel. (He ignores the 3rd one. Possibly the "Michseh" is just a waterproof covering for the top of the Mishkan.)

"The cloths of the Mishkan are royal fabrics created from the finest materials; woven inlaid with Keruvim and joined by gold clasps. The cloth of the Ohel, are made from goat's hair. Even if they are woven with the greatest care and attention, they were black, joined by simple copper clasps and made from the material used for the tents of the nomadic desert shepherd. The simple Ohel coverings are visible from the exterior. The ornate Keruvim weave of the Mishkan is visible only from within.

In Shir Hashirim, the Jewish People is depicted as a young girl: 'I am dark and beautiful ...like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Shlomo.' (1:3) And the meaning here is that dark tents of Kedar are as beautiful as the ornate fabric of the royal tent of Shlomo; as Chazal comment: 'I am dark' – on the outside, 'and beautiful' – on the inside. Even God Himself is depicted in Shir Hashirim sometimes as a king (Shlomo), and at other times as a shepherd, just as His tent-Mishkan appears as a royal palace from within and as a shepherd's tent on the outside.

The MISHKAN is MISHKAN HA'EDUT (Ex 38:21). Within the Mishkan is the ark of testimony (ARON HA'EDUT) which contains the two tablets – the LUCHOT HA'EDUT – the eternal witnesses to the royal event in which God with all his angels and hosts appeared to the Jewish people at the revelation upon Har Sinai. The OHEL is the TENT OF MEETING, Ohel Moed, (Vayikra 1:1). There "I will convene with you and speak to you from above the kapporet." (Shemot 25:22) It is there that the regular meetings take place between Moses and God, who shepherds and guides His flock daily...

The MISHKAN appears as a royal tent and at its foundation lies the concept of God's majesty and his dominion, his power, as expressed in the grand happening at Har Sinai. However, above the testimony stands the "meeting". Just as, above the curtains of the MISHKAN are the coverings of the OHEL that represent the shepherd's protection in the harsh conditions of the desert; similarly the rendezvous with God is the regular ongoing meeting with God, the Shepherd who guides his flock, Am Yisrael, demonstrating concern and protection on a daily basis." (Shabbat BeShabbato 5795)

God meet us at the peak of Mount Sinai, but he also guides us on an everyday basis. We meet God at a spiritual peak, but God is with us in our low moments as well. Rav Medan says that the Mishkan expresses these two dimensions of God's relationship to us.

But if we may extend this understanding, we might say that the dual covering expresses a more comprehensive duality in our relationship with God. There is the majestic encounter with God, which transpires infrequently. That event with all its royal power

and spiritual grandeur is only one side of our religious experience; the Israel-God relationship.

But another relationship exists. It is an everyday religion. It lacks the dizzying heights of spiritual ecstasy. It is a very humdrum, inconspicuous religion that governs our food, our thrice-daily prayers and our brachot. We don't always get a spiritual "lift" from these things as they blend into the regular rhythm of our everyday lives. They may be compared to the black goats-hair desert tent, that is the Mishkan on the outside. It looks like any and every Bedouin tent.

Judaism is special in this interesting weave between the regular normalness of the mitzvot, and the inner fire of the spirit that frequently remains hidden. This duality is expressed in the rich ornate golden inside of the Mishkan; and then the Ohel ordinary covering that was the outer surface of the Sanctuary with which it faces the outside.

## THE HIDDEN MISHKAN

It is clear from the pesukim that the beautifully ornate Mishkan covering is completely covered over by the simple Ohel. One wonders why? Why would the Torah want such rich colours woven in a beautiful keruvim design if it would be hidden from view? Rashi comments:

"From here we see that a person should be careful with beautiful objects."

As if to say that it was covered over so that it would not get dirty from the sand dust and rain. (as per Chavel's note - see Torat Chayim).

This might be true, but thinking this over we realise that when one looked at the Mishkan from the outside all one saw was the outer Ohel covering. The boards inlaid with gold, the ornate cloths were hidden from view. In fact we can go a stage further. Did a regular Israelite ever see the beautiful vessels of the Mishkan? Did they have an opportunity to view the aron, or the golden table, or the Menora? They were all hidden from view! Only a kohen would enter the Kodsh where they were situated. And when these kelim were in transit, they were all covered up. (see Bamidbar ch.4) It is quite incredible that whereas we have all these models of the aron and the other kelim of the Mikdash and we have beautiful colour photographs to look at the detail, the B'nei Yisrael NEVER EVER saw these things! They never saw the golden boards of the Mishkan, nor the aron, nor the menora. What did they see? A Bedouin tent!

Is there a logic to this?

## THE SIN OF THE GOLDEN CALF

It is interesting that many commentators connect the sin of the Golden Calf with the Mishkan. They do this because they see the establishment of the Mishkan as a response or a remedy to the sin of the Golden Calf. How so?

According to some commentators, the Golden Calf was not Avoda Zara - the worship of another deity. The Kuzari, for example, claims that the worshipers of the calf did not believe the calf to be an actual god but rather they saw in the calf a physical manifestation, a symbolic representation of Hashem, the One God. The calf was not a rebellion against God, a worshipping of an alternative power, but was rather an alternative more corporeal and palpable form of worship.

"God forbid that Aaron should commit idolatry!  
Also Israel did not request idolatry... [they wished]

the divine presence manifested in a corporeal manner" (Ibn Ezra, 32:1)

"Some individuals were prompted to request for a tangible object of worship in the manner of the other nations without rejecting God who had taken them out of Egypt, merely asking that it should be placed before them to gaze upon when relating to God" (Kuzari 1,97).

What these texts are saying is something quite simple. The ancient world religions were based on tangible symbols of gods. It was difficult for the primitive mind to conceive of an abstract god without an object in front of the person; a focal image that represented that god. This was a primary feature of paganism and this worship of icons or idols was common. There was a concept behind the images, but in the mind of the common person, it was impossible to connect with a concept without its personification or material representation.

So, the *egel hazahav* was doing the same thing according to the Kuzari. The people needed a tangible route to God. Their sin was that they did it in a forbidden way. All images are forbidden in Judaism (see the second of the Ten Commandments for example) and they are a short-cut to Pagan worship. The people might have sought a method in which to connect to God, but this had to be through God's approval.

#### ABSTRACTION

Enter the Mishkan. Now the Mishkan also had images. It had - for example - the keruvim. [4] The aron in some way acted as a vehicle for God's word - see 25:22. How was the aron going to act as the representative of God's ideas without itself becoming an object of worship?

I think that the answer is quite simple. The people NEVER EVER SAW the aron. It was hidden from the people in a "Bedouin tent." In fact, none of the golden symbolic objects were viewed by Am Yisrael, certainly not on a regular basis.

So then why have them?

We mentioned the problem of abstraction in the mind of the ancient world. They found it hard to perceive of a power without its tangible form. But God desires that we perceive Him abstractly. That we realise that He exists without body and form.

How could God educate the people of Israel to understand the principle of abstraction? How could God lead Am Yisrael to an understanding of Himself, without symbols?

Simple.

Make the Ritual objects. Design them replete with rich symbolism of God and His spiritual world. And then, hide them away. Everybody knows they are there. But they cannot be seen. Isn't this just like abstraction? The ideas are there, but not the objects. In this way, the object cannot become an object of worship in itself. At most, the values that underlie the object will be understood and internalised, but the danger of *avoda zara* is avoided.

In addition, the nation begins to develop "abstract thought" at a basic level. They understand that there are values that exist within the mind WITHOUT a corresponding physical manifestation of those values.

Just like God.

Maybe that is why we have a Mishkan in which all the gold and silver, the form and dimensions are written but not seen. We see a simple humble dwelling place, not a grand palace for the shechina. But in our minds we know what is inside and - more importantly - what it symbolises.

Shabbat Shalom.

#### footnotes

[1] There is some discussion as to what the Mishkan might be testifying to. See Rashi, Ibn Ezra on Shemot 38:21 and also Shemot Rabba 51:4

[2] See Avot 5:1

[3] The Netziv in HaEmek Davar also relates to this approach.

[4] See Rashi on Shemot 20:20 where he raises the question as to why the Keruvim could be allowed - aren't they images too?

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