

# Parashat Teruma

## Ohel Moed - Meeting God.

Our parsha inaugurates an entire section of the Torah which is devoted to the Mishkan - the Tabernacle. For the coming weeks the Torah leaves the sweeping narrative of the dramatic Exodus and the spectacle of the revelation at Sinai. Our attention turns instead, to the field of architecture. Precise measurements, design details and descriptions of raw materials - metals, woods, animal skins, colour dyes - are to take the centre stage. The text describes it all with painstaking detail.

### THE ORDER OF THE PARASHA - THE STRUCTURE OF THE MISHKAN.

**The very ordering of topics within the parasha reflects quite exactly, the floorplan of the Mishkan.** The placing of each item and detail in the Biblical text mirrors the map of the Mishkan itself. Here is a rough listing of the structure of Parashat Teruma and ... by extension the structure of the Mishkan.

#### INTRODUCTION:

25:1-9 The call to donate materials. Purpose of the Mishkan

#### RITUAL OBJECTS OF THE "HOLY OF HOLIES"

25:10-22 The Ark

#### RITUAL OBJECTS OF THE "HOLY"

25:23-25:29 The Table of the shewbread.

25:31-40 The Menorah

#### STRUCTURAL DETAILS OF THE "TENT" - "HOLY" & THE H. OF HOLIES

26:1-14 The cloth coverings of the Mishkan

26:15-30 The wood structure of the Mishkan

26:31-37 The parochet - curtain between the Holy and H.of Holies

#### RITUAL OBJECTS OF THE COURTYARD

27:1-8 The sacrificial altar

#### STRUCTURAL DETAILS OF THE COURTYARD

27:9-19 The boundary of the outer courtyard (the posts and cloth "walls")

As is evident from the outline above, that the ordering of the details in these chapters is systematic. **The description of the Mishkan works from inside outwards.** It begins by describing the inner area known as the Holy of Holies and it moves outwards to detail the outer chamber and courtyard. For each "area" or "zone" of the Mishkan, first the "kelim" - vessels or ritual articles - are described, followed by the construction details of the environment in which they reside. I think that the ordering; the description of the kelim BEFORE that of the structure; gives over the notion that the

kelim, rather than the impressive structure, are the focus of the Mishkan. Put a different way; it is the service of the mishkan that is the essence and not the tabernacle itself.

Maybe one short word of introduction would be in place here.

The Mishkan or tabernacle contains three basic areas or zones: the courtyard, the Kodesh (Holy), and the Kodesh Kodashim (Holy of Holies). The division of these three zones represents a progression from the profane to the sacred in incremental ascending scales of holiness.

The outer area is the courtyard which is unroofed. It is here that the main sacrificial altar (mizbeach) stands and all Israelites who are in a state of ritual purity can gain admission.

Within the courtyard is a covered structure - an area with restricted entry - which contains two sections. First is the "holy" to which a regular Israelites could not enter, only kohanim and Leviim. Within this area was an inner chamber - the Kodesh Kodashim. Only the High Priest would enter this chamber, on the holiest day of the year - Yom Kippur .

The materials used also reflect the incremental levels of holiness. In the Kodesh and the Kodesh Kodashim, the ritual objects are made from gold, the boards are plated with gold and the coverings are an ornate weave of intricate, decorative fabric. But in the outer courtyard, the altar is constructed from copper, and surrounded by plain wood posts in copper sockets, supporting simple white twisted linen divisions. The washing laver in the courtyard is also copper.

#### THE ARON HABRIT – ARK OF THE COVENANT

It would seem clear from our outline above, that the Ark, the Aron, stands at the epicentre of the Mishkan. It is placed in the Holy of Holies, it is the first of the tabernacle "furniture" to be described. It would seem to be placed at the head of the parsha of the Mishkan. But this is not where it's special nature begins or ends. Let us examine the Aron, thinking about its imagery and symbolism, in a quest to discover the true significance of this object.

"God had spoken with Israel face to face, delivering to them the Ten Commandments ... and Israel had accepted the performance of the commands that He would issue (via Moses). A covenant had been cut on this very act. Now they are His nation and He is to them as a God as he had defined from the start (19:5), 'and you will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (19:6).

It is befitting a holy nation that there be within their midst a sanctuary so that God's presence may dwell among them. Hence He commanded - as the very first command - that there be a Mishkan, a house sacred to His name where he

could speak with Moses and command the Children of Israel.

**The central focus of the Mishkan - the place of God's presence - is the Aron as it states, ' There will I meet you, and I will speak with you - from above the Kapporet ... (all that I will command you concerning the Children of Israel) (25:21).'** This is the reason that the Aron is mentioned at the top of the list, for it is the highest in level. (...but in Parshat Vayakhel (Ch. 35) when the structure and coverings of the Mishkan precede the description of the Aron, that is because it was these items that had to be crafted earliest.)" (Nachmanides to 25:1)

Let us examine this passage from the Ramban (Nachmanides). The Ramban asks as to the aim and purpose of the Mishkan and the Aron within it. He provides a straightforward answer. The Mishkan ensures that God will dwell amongst his people Israel. There is a historic-covenantal background to all this, however. In the aftermath of the monumental covenant between God and the nation of Israel, God commands that a place be established where He can have ongoing contact with His nation as an expression of the bond between them.

But a building is not enough. The covenant must be given a living expression. The medium through which God's presence is realised is the word of God. God's presence is felt, His desire for contact and relationship is expressed by the ongoing communication between Himself and Moses, the representative of the nation. God's commands form the basis of the God-man conversation, and this command, this conversation is to occur at the hub of the Mishkan, at the Aron, in the Holy of Holies. It is at this precise locus that the covenant is given its fulfilment.

But why the Aron? What is it about the Aron which makes this item the focal point of the Mishkan - the tabernacle? Why is the Aron placed at the head of the inventory of vessels of the sanctuary?

#### COMMUNICATION

"They shall make an Aron of acacia wood, two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high. Overlay it with pure gold - overlay it inside and out ... And deposit in the Aron [the tablets of] the pact (edut) which I will give you. You shall make a cover (Kapporet) of pure gold, two and a half cubits long and a cubit and a half wide. Make two cherubim of gold - make them of hammered work - at the two ends of the Kapporet ... The cherubim shall have their wings spread out above, shielding the cover with their wings ... Place the Kapporet-cover on top of the Aron, after placing inside the Aron, the pact that I will give you. There will I meet you, and I will speak with you - from above the Kapporet, between the two cherubim that are on top of the Aron of the pact - all that I will command you concerning the Children of Israel." (25:10-21)

The very content of the Aron belies its function. It is a storage box - "as with a great treasure which is deposited with a person for safekeeping" (Ibn Ezra 25:16). The

"treasure" inside the box, is the two tablets of stone. These tablets are the definitive symbol of the covenant. Indeed, the text here describes the tablets by a simple, but powerful title. They are called "EDUT" - testimony. They testify to the pact between God and the nation.

It is at this "Aron of the Covenant" that God will speak to Moses. "There will I meet you, and I will speak with you". The location is described with great precision - between the cherubim, above the Kapporet, on top of the covenantal Aron - a meeting place is set where God will meet man, confronting, commanding, and continuing the covenantal relationship .

Indeed, the Aron as an object is seen as the very seat of God's presence. "And when the Aron travelled, Moses proclaimed:

'Arise God, scatter your enemies, may your foes flee before you!  
And when it halted, he would say,  
"Return, O Lord, to the Israel's myriad thousands.' " (Bamidbar 10:35, 36)

When the Aron moves, God moves. When the Aron rests, God rests.

#### DISTANCE

A clear proof for this theory of the Ramban - that communication is the expression of the covenant and God's closeness to the nation - can be demonstrated from the great betrayal of the covenant. This occurred in the weeks of crisis and insecurity that followed the sin of the golden calf. There we read:

"Now Moses took the Tent and pitched it OUTSIDE the camp, at some distance from the camp. It was called the tent of meeting, and whoever sought the Lord would go to the tent of meeting that was outside the camp... And when Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance to the tent while He spoke with Moses... The Lord would speak to Moses face to face ... " (33:7-11)

At this stage there is, as yet, no sanctuary and no Aron. However, the passage is clear. The people have betrayed God. They have betrayed their exclusive commitment to God and have thereby brought the pact into question. The relationship itself, between God and Israel is under review. How do we proceed? How can the damage be repaired? In this atmosphere, **the word of God cannot be heard from within the camp.** God's presence will not rest in the midst of the camp which have broken the pact. God's presence, his word is the fulfilment of the covenant. The Tent, the communication, leaves the camp and moves outside.

Maybe then, the historic significance of the establishment of the Mishkan in the epicentre of the camp, takes on new meaning. After a period of estrangement, the inception of the Mishkan means that God will speak from WITHIN the camp. "And they will make for me a sanctuary, and I will DWELL IN THEIR MIDST" (25:8). The Mishkan signifies covenant, communication and the divine presence. All of this is embodied in the holy Aron. It is the Aron which contains the symbol of the pact. It is the Aron which facilitates communication with God. The Aron transforms the Mishkan, or sanctuary, into a Tent of Meeting, with the Divine presence itself.

## A PERPETUAL MT. SINAI

Nachmanides, however, takes this theory to new heights. He suggests imagery for the Mishkan which propels the Mishkan into a new league.

"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 Mishkan:
"The CLOUD covered the mountain, and GOD'S PRESENCE rested upon Mt. Sinai" (24:16).	"The CLOUD covered the tent of meeting, and GOD'S PRESENCE filled the Mishkan." (40:34)
"From the heavens he let you HEAR his VOICE" (Devarim 4:36)	"And he HEARD the VOICE ... from between the Keruvim" (Bamidbar 7:89)

The Ramban even identifies the gold colour of the Aron with the great fire that was visible at the peak of Mt. Sinai! And we can add other examples of our own. One relates to Moses' restricted entry to the Mishkan, in the same way, and with the same phraseology that was used concerning his restricted ascent to Mt. Sinai.

"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)

"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)

In both cases, God's presence and its outer manifestation- the cloud - envelope a particular place, so that Moses cannot enter. He will enter only when invited.

What does this Mt. Sinai-Mishkan connection signify? What does the Mt. Sinai experience have in common with the Mishkan? The miraculous, supernatural event of the revelation at Sinai was impressive, overwhelming, but where does that power lead? Where does it find a sense of permanence? - in the Mishkan. The Mishkan is the continuation of Mt. Sinai. It takes the frightening spectacle and brings it into the daily routine. The Mishkan perpetuates the Sinai experience.

Here, two things are critical: The intense presence of God, and the voice of God. The presence of God, is his closeness. The word "Mishkan", comes from the root SHaCHaN - to dwell, or live. God now lives in the midst of the Children of Israel. To what purpose? **To continue the transmission of the life giving Torah.** Hence, the Mishkan serves the same function, in miniature, as the Sinai experience.

## THE RAMBAM

Thus far, we have described the Aron as the centrepiece of the Mishkan. The Aron is seen as the "seat" of the divine presence. It represents God himself. It is His mouthpiece. It also represents Israel's covenant and its living connection with God. As for the rest of the Mishkan, the entire structure revolves around, and is secondary to the Aron.

But this is not the only possible order of priorities within the sanctuary. Let us remember, that during the entire Second Temple, there was no Aron! (It was stored in a secret location to prevent its falling into enemy hands. See Mishna Yoma 5:2 and Shekalim 6:1,2) If we follow our description thus far, how can a temple exist in the absence of an Aron?

This is Maimonides' definition of the command to build a sanctuary:

"It is a positive command to make a house for God, facilitating the sacrificial service, and (the nation) celebrate there three times a year, as it states (Shemot 25:1) "You shall make for me a sanctuary." The Torah describes the Mishkan that Moses made, but that structure was temporary ... And one makes sacred vessels for the sanctuary: A sacrificial altar ... its ramp.. a washing laver ... a altar for incense, a menorah, a table" (Laws of the Temple Chap 1)

Where is the Aron?

Maimonides barely makes mention of the Aron, not in his description of the basic function of the Temple, nor in the subsequent detail. In Maimonides' perspective, the Temple, or sanctuary has a different focal point. The centre of the Temple is the altar [1]. Why? Because according to Maimonides, the central function of the sanctuary is our service to God. We serve God by bringing sacrifices upon the altar. That is what our role is in the sanctuary, and it is within this service that we find meaning. The altar symbolises Man's service. It is the medium by which man approaches God.

## A PHILOSOPHIC DIFFERENCE.

The difference of emphasis as to where the centre point of the Mishkan lies might seem an architectural triviality at first glance, but in truth, the philosophical foundations of each approach are vastly different.

Is the Mishkan the place in which God approaches us, or is it the place in which we approach God?

Putting the Aron at the centre means that the primary function of the sanctuary is the creation of a seat for the Shekhina - God's presence. "Make for me a sanctuary - so that I will rest my presence in your midst." (25:8). God approaches Man.

But putting the altar at the centre reverses the direction completely. With the altar at the centre, I focus upon how I may serve God. I see myself as His servant. The Mishkan is the place that allows me to approach the Almighty. This

facilitates a mode of service. Now the aim is not so much God descending to earth, but mankind ascending to Him. Man approaches, ascends to God!

So, this simple question of priority within the ritual vessels of the Mishkan leads to two very different philosophies as to how to build a relationship with God. This week, when we consider the Mishkan, we might well ponder the path that leads to closeness with God. Does He make the first move, or do we?

Shabbat Shalom.

EPILOGUE: HUMAN SERVICE OR THE DIVINE PRESENCE – THE BOOK OF SHEMOT VS. THE BOOK OF VAYIKRA.

At this point, we can already define two basic approaches to the Mishkan. One view sees the Aron at the centre; the other puts the altar, the Mizbeach at the centre.

These two perspectives are representative of two books of the Torah. The book of Shemot is Aron focussed. The book of Vayikra barely even mentions the Aron. It is absolutely focussed upon the altar, the Mizbeach.

Why? The book of Shemot is the story of a nation in exile, who receive God's law, who join God's covenant, and desire to have God's presence among them. The desire is for God to "descend" to the people. That is the meaning of the revelation at Sinai, the construction of the Mishkan, and entire tension which surrounds the crisis of the golden calf (see 33:4-6, 15-16. 34:6-10) and that is the point on which the book ends. The aim is to use God's word in guiding the nation on their mission to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." In this book, the Aron of God is central.

But in the book of Vayikra –Leviticus - the centre stage is taken by the sacrifices, the korbanot. In Vayikra, the focus is the priests, the Kohanim, who function around the Mishkan. Here, when man serves God, the Mizbeach becomes the focal point. [2]

#### Footnotes

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[1] There were times in which the Aron and the altar were in totally different locations! (See the mishna in Zevachim and Rambam Hil. Beit Habechira 1:2.) This was from the time of the destruction of Shiloh until the construction of Solomon's Temple. The Aron moved around the lands of the Pelishtim, to Beit Shemesh, to Kiryat Yearim, to Beit Oved Edom, to Jerusalem. (see Samuel 1 ch.5-6, II Ch.6. At the same time the altar was in Nov and Givon.

[2] Alternatively, one might contrast the start of the Mishkan unit here in ch.25 where it is the Aron that causes the Shechina to rest, with the end of the Mishkan unit in ch.29 – see vs. 42-46 – where the revelation is described in connection to the Mizbeach. So this dialectical tension exists within Sefer Shemot also.

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