

*Kangaroos and Tabernacles, & the God Inside of You*  
Parashat Vayakhel-Pikkudei/Shabbat Ha'Chodesh  
March 13, 2021; 29 Adar 5781  
Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

Have you heard the story of the discovery of the kangaroo? In 1770 a 98 foot long British Naval vessel named HM Endeavor, under the command of Captain James Cook became the first European ship to reach the eastern coast of Australia. Sailing along the coast and stopping at various points as it traveled north, Endeavor ran aground in the Great Barrier Reef of the coast of Queensland. Unable to continue the voyage before extensive repairs were made to the vessel, Captain Cook led an expeditionary party onto the mainland to meet the local population. The sailors were not only met by the aboriginal peoples of the region but also by a number of strange 5 foot tall quadruped creatures hopping around with their young riding in pouches on their abdomens. The exploration party had never seen a creature like this and they asked the locals what the animal was called. The reply was something like "kanguru." From that moment on, the British referred to this large marsupial as a kangaroo. They made sketches of the animal, and brought back stories about it to the continent. Only one detail was lost in translation. The word 'kanguru' was not in fact what the aboriginal peoples called this animal. 'Kanguru' meant, 'I have no idea what you are saying!' 'Ikh farshtey nisht...I don't understand you!' This is a classic example of people using the same words, but meaning very different things.

When you think about it, it happens all the time in our conversations with people. Have you ever said in exasperation, "Are we even speaking the same language?" when trying to get a point across that just doesn't seem to be understood by the other person. Some suggest that men and women, somewhat stereotypically to be sure, 'speak different languages.' The popular author John Gray sold over 15 million books claiming that *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus!* Sometimes the same language, the same words have different meanings depending on the generation that is using them. If my parents ask for the "tea," they want a hot drink in a mug. If my teenager asks for the "tea," they want the gossip. Same word, different meaning. Around here if I'm looking for "the Hoch," I probably need to talk to Morah Beth. But with the younger set, "the hoch" means the details, the story, the chatter about something or someone. Same word, entirely different meaning. And of course there is no greater example of words we think we understand actually having vastly different meanings than the Torah itself.

We have spent the last several weeks-worth of Torah portions: Terumah, Tetzaveh, Ki Tissa, and now Vayakhel-Pikkudei detailing and reviewing every minute detail of the Mishkan, the holy tabernacle, the tent in the wilderness and all of its cloths and fabrics, beams and poles, planks and posts; every basin and bowl, every article of clothing that those who entered that space would wear and when. The creation of the universe is detailed in about 34 verses; the creation of the Mishkan literally takes hundreds of verses, more than ten times longer! And the whole thing is prefaced by those famous words: *Ve'asu li mikdash, ve'shachanti betocham...* promising that if the Jewish people construct a sanctuary for God, that God will "dwell among them." But you don't have to be King Solomon for the question to occur to you "*Ha'umnam yeishev Elohim al ha'aretz?*" Will God really "dwell" on earth? Literally as King Solomon is dedicating the First Temple, it occurs to him that "even the heights of the heavens cannot contain You, God, *af ki*

*habayit ha'zeh asher baniti*, "surely this house that I have built can't contain You!"<sup>[1]</sup> Or as more than one wily Hebrew school student has challenged me, 'If God is in here, doesn't that mean that God is not out there?' This is precisely where language gets us into trouble. Because, as the Rambam taught us in his philosophical writings over 800 years ago, we can't really say anything about God. At least not in the affirmative. The minute you say God is anything, you have limited God, and forced God into the human construct of that word or description. *El Rachum*, we say, God is merciful. All we know about being merciful is what human beings are capable of. When we talk about God's mercy, the dimensions are totally unfathomable. We say God is *nosei avon*, forgiving of sin. I think I am a pretty forgiving person, but God's forgiveness is on a totally different plain...I can't even begin to imagine what it means for God to forgive. So really, we are not even speaking the same language. Every word, every adjective, every description that we use for God really doesn't do much describe God at all. God is not bound by human definitions or imagination. As Heschel wrote: "Never is our mind so inadequate as in trying to describe God." That is why it always strikes me as funny when certain "religious types" claim to know with certainty the mind of God, the will of God. When they claim to speak for God, or know precisely what God's truth is. If you ever hear someone make those claims you can pretty safely assume that they are phony. Maybe a phony with the best intentions, but phony nonetheless.

So, to my Hebrew School student I would say that when the Torah says that God is in this place, it does not mean that God is not somewhere else. When the Torah says that God dwells in the *Mishkan*, or that Moses could not enter the Tabernacle because *shachan alav ha'anan*, the cloud of God's presence inhabited that space, it does not mean that an infinite being was somehow squeezed into a finite space. Dwelling, being, inhabiting, these are all human terms, with human limitations...none of which contain the God of the universe.

Why then all the discussion in the Torah about God being present in a tent in the wilderness? Why so much attention to the building materials and dimensions of the space? I heard a beautiful lecture from Rabbi Yoni Levin who offered the following answer. IF somehow the *Ein Sof*, that's the kabbalistic term for the Infinite One, the God Who is beyond all time and space, can somehow "dwell" in a sanctuary of wood and metal and cloth and yarns and skins...then that same infinite God can also "dwell" inside each and every human being. The Tabernacle is a template, a way of demonstrating to the Jewish people that just as God can infuse a physical space, God can infuse a person, a heart, a soul, a mind. Again, exactly what that means, or how it happens...that is beyond our limited human ability to comprehend. But the mishkan is a symbol for how God's presence enters and inhabits both people and places.

There is a beautiful teaching to this effect in tractate Megillah, page 29a. There Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach says: Come and see how beloved the Jewish people are to the Holy One of Blessing...*kama chavivin yisrael liftnei ha'Kadosh Baruch Hu*...For wherever they were exiled, the *Shechinah* (God's presence) is with them. When they were exiled to Egypt, the *Shechinah* was with them...When they were exiled to Babylon, the *Shechinah* was with them...*Ve'af she'hen atidin liga'el*, and when, in the future they are redeemed, the *Shechinah* will be with them, returning with the exiles of the Jewish people. In all those exiles; in all the places we have found ourselves over the centuries of dispersion and wandering, we didn't have a *Mishkan*, or *Beit*

---

<sup>[1]</sup> | Kings 8:27

*Ha'Mikdash*; no Tabernacles or Temples...So where was God's presence? In every beating Jewish heart. And that is where the *Shechinah* is right now. Inside of you and me. Guarding us and guiding us; giving us hope and inspiring us with confidence; keeping the promises made to our ancestors alive within us. The *Mishkan* is the Jewish people. You are its pillars and planks, its walls and screens. We are never alone or lost because God's presence is always within us.