

Torah On One Foot Rabbi Matthew Berger



Neither Early or Late

This week's Torah portion, *T'rumah* ("Gifts"), describes the process by which the Israelites are going to construct the Tabernacle or desert sanctuary. So the text lays out the specs and lists the particulars of what is needed. Sounds pretty straightforward, right? But there's a catch. Midway through the explanation, which includes next week's Torah portion as well as the final two in the book of Exodus, we read about the Golden Calf incident.

Our sages were puzzled by this. Why is this quintessential story of idolatry sandwiched in between the description of the Tabernacle, the priestly clothing, and the sanctification of the priests. It didn't make any sense to have this major interruption occur where it did. So they came to terms with it in a unique way, saying in the Talmud, "there is no earlier or later in the Torah." This way, they could offer unique commentaries on the seeming inconsistencies in the text.

Looking at the Torah this way opens up new possibilities. Maybe the story of the Golden Calf actually preceded the giving of the instructions for creating a Tabernacle. Judaism teaches that God can be found anywhere. So why would we need a Tabernacle at all? A commentary explains that after God forgave the Israelites for worshipping the Golden Calf, Moses asked for a sign that would let the people know they were forgiven. In response, God said, "I will let My presence dwell among the Israelites, so that all may know that I have forgiven Israel" (*Legends of the Jews*, Louis Ginzberg).

The idea that God is everywhere is one of the more difficult ideas to grasp. It's probably why the story of the Golden Calf was no surprise. So we created a sanctuary for God to dwell in. A focal point around which we can gather as a community. Thus it is said, "Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8).