

The Mishkan
Parashat Terumah
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And The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him. ... And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them. Exactly as I show you—the pattern of the Tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings—so shall you make it. (Exodus 25: 2-9)

With these words, the last third of the Book of Exodus begins: fifteen chapters in all, devoted to the design and construction of the Tabernacle, a portable sanctuary to be built by the Israelites in the wilderness.

Imagine the view one would have upon entering the Tabernacle: standing in the outer court, facing the Holy of Holies (shielded by a veil), one would see a table (on which bread would be placed) on the left, and a menorah to the right. A beautiful image, ... but, frankly, static.

It's no surprise that whenever screen writers have tried to capture the essence of the Book of Exodus on film, they haven't known what to do with these chapters. (Generally, they've ignored them!) Compared with the first third of the book, the part that focuses on the escape from Egyptian slavery, and the second third, that describes the dramatic giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, this portion is, frankly, anti-climactic. Perhaps, if you're an architect or interior designer, you might get excited about the lengthy and repeated descriptions of the various parts of the Tabernacle, but it hardly compares, in drama and in excitement, with the earlier material. And the description is so arcane: there is a tent, intricate embroidery, a sacrificial altar, and an ark—not at all like the synagogue in which we are praying today. And yet fully a third of the book is devoted to this material, so it must be important. The question is why, and what does it all mean?



That's really a triple question. First, on the one hand, why was it necessary for the Israelites to stop and build a tabernacle instead of going straight toward their ostensible goal, namely, the Land of Israel? Why are they told to invest time and materials in this project instead of concerning themselves with provisions for their journey? Second, why are they told to build it in this particular way and not some other way? Third, why is it important for us to read about it? After all, any literary work is an edited presentation of what could have been transmitted. Why is the Torah edited in the way that it is, with so much material on the Mishkan? What is this designed to teach us?

To address the first question first, think about what the Israelites were doing when they were still back in Egypt. What was their daily activity? It was, of course, building. Their job was to carry out detailed orders to build the store-cities of Pharaoh, namely, Pit'hom and Ramses. That's what they were commanded to do: to build monuments for the Pharaohs, who styled themselves to be divine.

And think about the reason Moses gave to Pharaoh to let the people go? "Let them go," he said, "so that they can worship God," (5:1, 9:13, and elsewhere). Given that this was the reason given to Pharaoh, it wouldn't be right if it later turned out to be only an excuse. And what more fitting way to demonstrate their new loyalty, than to use the same skills they'd perfected in Egypt, but this time toward a new end: the construction of a portable house of worship to God?

Thus, it does make sense that, after escaping from Egypt, they would construct a tabernacle within which to worship God.

But why this way? Why a tabernacle, and not, say, a sanctuary for prayer? If our conception of God is that He cannot be confined to any one place, and certainly has no need for food or drink, why would He/She insist on the creation of a portable enclosure for sacrificial rites to take place?

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This past week, someone who I hadn't thought about in almost forty years passed away. Perhaps it's not surprising that, as a baby boomer, as someone who is exactly mid-way in age between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, I would be struck by the death of someone who I recall first learning about in the '60s, when I

was a teenager. I'm speaking of that Indian master, that guru of gurus, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who died this past Tuesday in the Netherlands in his 90's. The Maharishi was perhaps the most famous of the Indian spiritual masters of the late 1960s. I, and those of my generation, learned about him when the Beatles visited him in 1968. (The Beatles, for those too young to remember, is the name of a singing group—an old-fashioned British singing group—that used to be popular many years ago, when the Ed Sullivan Show was an American institution.)

The Beatles visited the Maharishi at his ashram just about forty years ago. This brought to the attention of the West various aspects of Eastern religion, most prominently the techniques of transcendental meditation. Transcendental meditation is a form of meditation that is said to help its practitioners experience clearer thinking, better health, fulfilling relationships and a peaceful world. At the time, in the late 1960s, it was dismissed by most Americans—in fact, by much of the Western world—as “hippie mysticism” (Obituary of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Mike Corder, Boston Globe, February 6, 2008, p. D12).

Forty years ago, meditation was thought to be entirely foreign to those of us living in the West. Not only secular, scientifically grounded people felt this way, but also religious people—perhaps, especially religious people—in the West, that is, practicing Jews and Christians—who couldn't see any relevance in this practice. What, after all, did it have to do with Judaism? With Christianity?

A minister or rabbi interviewing for a job in the late 1960s would never have said, “Oh, I would like to introduce meditation practices here in the congregation.” If he (and then, it was mostly “he”) wouldn't have had much of a chance. If religious or cultural leaders had said, “This is how we are all going to worship from now on,” or “this is what all of us should now be doing,” there would have been massive opposition.

Now, forty years later, things are different. Meditation is taught to medical students in the premier medical schools. Meditation in general is far more widely accepted—not only, subjectively, as a means of achieving inner serenity, but as an objectively verifiable way to reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and improve concentration. Even twenty years ago, when I trained as a chaplain at the Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York—one of the premier medical centers,

considered at the pinnacle of Western medicine—at least south of Boston—part of my curriculum included learning meditation techniques, which can be enormously effective at reducing pain and diminishing anxiety in cancer patients. Western medical doctors such as Herbert Benson have written extensively about the proven effects of meditation. It has finally become an important element in the repertoire of caring techniques Western physicians use today.

Meditation can also be found in churches and synagogues across America. As I indicated, to have insisted, in the late 1960s, that people start meditating would have been resisted strongly. Today, if you tell people to close their eyes in shul, they're thrilled! Indeed, as we've opened ourselves up to examine what meditation is all about, lo and behold, we've come to see that there are Jewish meditation practices that are centuries old, and in fact the very structure of the prayer service that we are participating in today is designed to induce a meditative state. But that message, had it been offered forty years ago, wouldn't have been heard.

Rambam (Maimonides) asks the same question we did about the design and construction of the tabernacle. Already by his day, the notion of animal sacrifice was considered primitive. The Moslems among whom he lived did not practice animal sacrifice and it was undoubtedly somewhat embarrassing for him to read these chapters in the Torah. Why weren't the Israelites commanded to build a prayer hall rather than a place to offer sacrifices?

His answer, in essence, is that everyone else around them was worshipping in tabernacles. They were told to prepare animal sacrifices because that is how they had worshipped in Egypt and that is how everyone around them worshipped. It would have been too difficult for them to be told to abandon the ways they had long practiced, even though there might ultimately be understood to be other, better ways to serve God. The reason, Maimonides said, is that people are people. They need forms that are familiar to them to seek the transcendent. Do we imagine that they were so different from us today? They had to build a tabernacle because that was the way, in that day and age, in their society, one communed with the divine.

So the Israelites had to build a tabernacle. I think it's worth noting, though, that even though they worshipped in a structure similar to those of the other peoples

among whom they lived, there was at least one big difference: unlike the other tabernacles or temples among them, theirs faced west, not east. As all the other people around them were bowing down to the sun each morning, they were turning their backs to the sun, to worship a deity not bound by nature but rather beyond it.

Our third and final question remains to be answered. What does it mean, what might it mean, for us to read the story?

Rashi, in his commentary on the very end of the passage I read earlier, makes it clear that there is a lesson in this passage for us. Recall that the passage concludes with the words, “Exactly as I show you, so shall you make it.” Rashi, picking up on the unnecessarily emphatic quality of those concluding words, reads them as speaking to us. Every generation, he understands this to say, must build the mishkan. Malbim, a 19th century commentator adds, “eph sar laasoto b’chol ha-dorot u’v’chol ha tekufot.” “You can construct the mishkan in every generation, in every era.”

Thus, this story must be understood symbolically as well as descriptively. We’re not just reading it to learn what “happened,” as it were, but to learn, symbolically, what we are supposed to do.

What is it then that we are supposed to do? What indeed does the tabernacle symbolize? Not to the ex-slaves who are said to have built the mishkan in the wilderness, but to us?

Here’s my perspective: At those moments when we might think that our responsibility is to press on with our next practical challenge, perhaps our true responsibility is to pause and to make room, literally, to create space for the spiritual. Maybe in addition to attending to our ostensible goal of getting to our own version of the Promised Land—which, we have to be honest, we may never reach—maybe we need to attend to our spiritual needs as well.

There are lots of details in the story of the mishkan that reinforce this message. The Ark itself, you may recall, has to be coated on the inside as well as on the outside, with gold. (25:11) Even though no one looks inside the Ark, it has to be coated with gold. That’s very impractical, but it’s necessary. Just as we must worry about sustaining our outsides, so too do we have to care about our spiritual, internal well-

being. We have to be meticulous with this project, as meticulous as with any practical undertaking. And there's an additional requirement: contributions to the construction project can only be accepted from those whose hearts are willing (kol ish asher yidvenu libo). We can't succeed in creating our spiritual sanctuary if our heart is not in it.

And we also can't wait to engage in this kind of work until we feel we have time for it. As the Talmud teaches regarding the mitzvah of Torah study, a key way of achieving spiritual nourishment, "Al tomar licheshe'epaneh, eshneh." "Don't say, 'When I have leisure, I'll study.'" "Shema lo tipaneh." "You may never have leisure."

The same is true of the other ways we pursue spiritual goals, whether through prayer, or fulfilling mitzvot, whether they be interpersonal mitzvot, helping other people, or obligations toward God. These can't be set aside. Even though they may be impractical, they have to be pursued.

Think about what it means to sit in shul on a Shabbat morning. How eminently impractical! And yet how else, if not regularly and meticulously, and with devotion and joy, can one be certain to pursue the holy, the beautiful, the spiritual?

I want to close with an image. The image you would get if you were looking directly toward the Holy of Holies from the courtyard of the Tabernacle. Before you, at the far end, behind the curtain, is the Holy Ark. To your left is a table with bread on it, to your right is the menorah, which was to be lit each and every night.

What better symbolism of our path? Yes, we have to work. We have to attend to the practical. We have to pay the mortgage. We have to support our families. We have to, literally, put bread on the table

But, on the other hand, we also have to nourish ourselves spiritually. We have to light the lamps, and be illuminated by their glow and warmed by their flames. Only if we do both, can we hope ever to be worthy to approach the Holy of Holies, can we ever hope to truly fulfill the promise implicit in being granted the privilege of life itself.

Shabbat Shalom.