

# PARASHAT TERUMAH

*Exodus 25:1–27:19*

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*Parashat Terumah* is about building the first sanctuary, or the Tabernacle. The Israelites are still wandering through the Sinai desert. Moses instructs each person to bring a *terumah*, or “donation,” “gift,” for the building of the sanctuary. The contributions may be of gold, silver, and copper; of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats’ hair; tanned ram skins, dolphin skins, and acacia wood; oil for lighting, spices for the anointing oil and for the aromatic incense; lapis lazuli and other precious stones for the *ephod* and breastplate. Concerning the Tabernacle, God says to Moses, “And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.” Instructions for the architecture of the sanctuary are detailed. The ark and poles for carrying it shall be made of acacia wood overlaid with gold. Two gold cherubim with large wings are to be placed above the ark, facing each other. A table of acacia wood overlaid with gold is to be made, along with special bowls and jars for offering sacrifices. Moses is also instructed to build a *menorah*, or “lampstand,” of pure hammered gold to hold seven lamps. As for the sanctuary itself, Moses is given details of its size, the material to be used in its construction, and instructions on how to assemble it.

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## OUR TARGUM

• 1 •

**W**hile still on Mount Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments, Moses is also given instructions for building the sanctuary in which the people will worship God during their wanderings through the desert. God tells him

to ask each Israelite to bring a *terumah*, or “gift,” “contribution,” for the construction. God says to Moses, “And let them make Me a *mikdash* [“sanctuary”] that I may dwell among them.”

• 2 •

Details for the creation of each aspect of the sanctuary are given to Moses.



The ark and two poles for carrying it are to be of acacia wood overlaid with gold. A cover of gold is also to be made for it, along with two winged gold cherubim who are to be placed facing each other above the ark. "There I will meet with you, and I will speak to you . . . and I will command you concerning the Israelite people," God tells Moses.

• 3 •

Moses also receives instructions about making a table and poles to carry it. They are to be made of acacia wood overlaid with gold. Special bowls, ladles, jars, and jugs are to be fashioned to hold the liquids for offerings to God.

Along with the table and its poles, other furnishings for inside the sanctuary include a seven-branched lampstand, or *menorah*. There are to be three branches on each side of its center. Each branch will contain three cups shaped like almond-

blossoms with calyx and petals. The center lampstand is to contain four cups shaped like almond-blossoms. Moses is told, "Note well, and follow the patterns. . . ."

• 4 •

Moses is also given an architectural plan and instructions for the materials to be used in creating the Tabernacle. Included are the sizes for the acacia wood planks for the walls, the number of cloths of goats' hair for coverings, and the number of sockets for attaching the planks and cloths. A curtain of blue, purple, and crimson yarns and fine twisted linen with the design of cherubim worked into it is to cover the ark.

• 5 •

The plan of the altar, which will be made of acacia wood, calls for a horn overlaid with copper on each of its four corners. Pails, scrapers, basins,

flesh hooks, and fire pans—all for use when sacrifices are offered—are also to be made of copper. Poles of acacia wood overlaid with copper are to be used in carrying the altar when it is moved.

A description of the Tabernacle's inside furnishings includes hangings of fine twisted linen, silver-banded posts, copper pegs, and sockets.

## THEMES

*Parashat Terumah* contains two important themes:

1. The function of the *mikdash*, or “sanctuary,” in Jewish tradition.
2. The Torah's emphasis upon the “details” of the sanctuary.

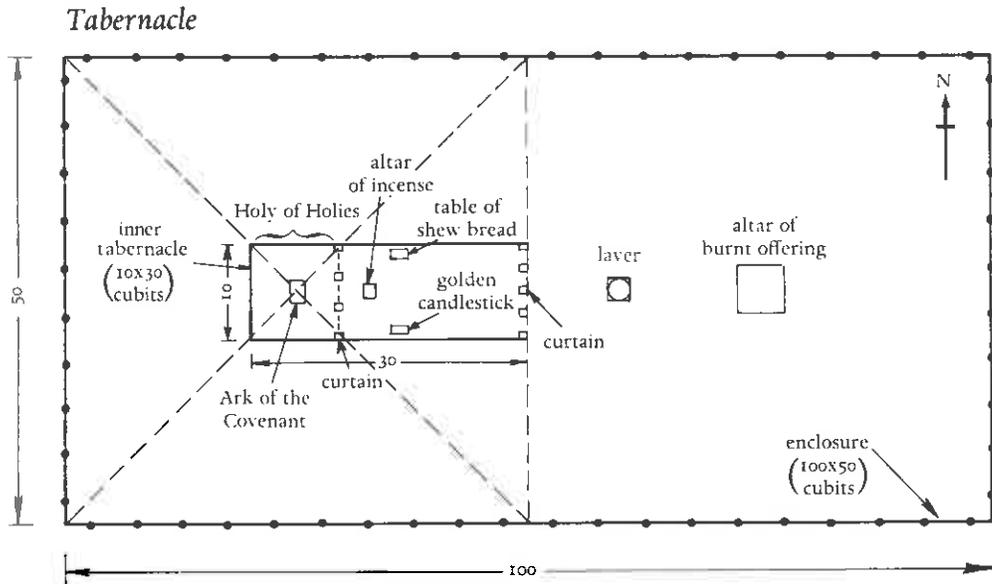
## PEREK ALEF: *The Sanctuary in Jewish Tradition*

Before the creation of the first *mikdash*, or “sanctuary,” the Hebrews worshiped God on hilltops, beside streams, or wherever they felt moved to pray. Abraham and Isaac traveled to Mount Moriah; Jacob encountered God in a lonely place on the desert and near the river Jabbok; Moses met God through an ordinary bush and at the top of Mount Sinai. Now, after their liberation from Egypt and the acceptance of the laws given to them at Mount Sinai, the people are commanded to build a sanctuary.

The sanctuary is to contain the Ark of the Cov-

enant with its sacred stones on which the Ten Commandments are inscribed. It is to be placed in the Holy of Holies chamber inside the inner tabernacle. The opening of the Holy of Holies chamber is to be covered by a curtain. Outside the curtain is a special altar for incense, a table for the shew bread, and a golden *menorah*, or “lamp-stand.” In front of the inner tabernacle is another curtain, outside of which are the laver and an altar for burnt offerings. Clearly, the sanctuary is designed for offering sacrifices and prayers to God.

Some scholars believe that the description of the *mikdash* did not belong to the original Torah but was added to the story of the Exodus by later priests who wanted to justify the existence of the



Temple and priesthood in Jerusalem. To prove their point, these critics argue that many of the materials mentioned in the Torah's description of the *mikdash* were not available to the ancient Israelites in the Sinai desert.

Other scholars disagree, maintaining that the *mikdash* was one of the earliest of all Jewish institutions, though later authors of the Torah may have exaggerated about how it was built or about the materials used in its construction. H. M. Orlinsky explains: "Acacia wood—cedar, cyprus, or olive was later used in Canaan—ramskins, lambskins, cloths of goats' hair, and the like are all manifestations of nomadic existence." (Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, p. 599)

While we may never be able to prove when the *mikdash*, or the first Jewish sanctuary, came into existence, the Torah does seek to clarify its purpose. Moses is instructed by God to tell the people, "And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them."

What do these words really mean? Is it possible God was telling the people that, without a sanctuary, a building, a place for the Ark of the Covenant, or altars for sacrifice, they would not sense the presence of God in their lives? Are sanctuaries necessary for worship, for finding God? Does God require a building in order to "dwell" among human beings?

*Where does God dwell?*

*O God, where shall I find You?  
All hidden and exalted is Your place;  
And where shall I not find You?  
Full of Your glory is the infinite space. (Yehudah Halevi)*

*There is no place without God. (Sa'adia ben Joseph Ha-Gaon)*

*Wherever you find a human footprint, there God is before you. (Mechilta to Exodus 17:6)*

*The Kobriner Rabbi turned to his Chasidim and said: "Do you know where God is?" Then he took a piece of bread, showed it to them, and continued: "God is in this piece of bread. With-*

*out God's nurturing power in all nature, this piece of bread would have no existence."*

*"Where is the dwelling of God?" This was the question with which Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk surprised a number of learned people who happened to be visiting him. They laughed at him: "What a thing to ask! Is not the whole world full of God's glory!" Then he answered his own question: "God dwells wherever we let God in." (Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters*, Schocken Books, New York, 1961, p. 277)*

Jewish tradition teaches that we experience God in many ways. God is to be found in the beauty and mystery of nature, in the love and friendship we share with others, in the spiritual impact of a ritual or celebration, and in the work done to promote justice, generosity, and peace. There is no exclusive "place" for God. There are many places where God dwells. King Solomon, who built the first Temple in Jerusalem, admitted that God, who could not be contained by all the heavens, could certainly not be limited to "this house that I have built!" (I Kings 8:27)

If that is so, if no *mikdash*, or "sanctuary," can be the exclusive place of God, then what can the Torah mean when it reports that God said to Moses, "Make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them"? What is the purpose or the function of the sanctuary in Jewish tradition?

The early rabbis offer an answer through an imaginary conversation between God and the people of Israel. They picture the people explaining to God that all human rulers have beautiful palaces, rooms where offerings are brought to them and where the people can demonstrate their loyalty and love. The people say to God, "Shouldn't You, our Ruler, have such a palace?" And, according to the rabbis, God responds, "My children, I have no need for such a place. After all, I do not eat or drink. Obviously, however, you have a need for such a place. It will help you experience Me. For that reason, build a sanctuary and I will dwell in your midst."

What the early rabbis sensed was our human need for a place of worship, a special space set

aside for meditation and prayer. It is the nature of human beings to uplift the importance of ordinary buildings by assigning them unique functions and names. Out of bricks and mortar, steel and poured concrete, we create and decorate structures we call “capitals,” “museums,” “concert halls,” “theaters,” and “courts.” Sometimes we add to their importance by linking to them the names of popular personalities or donors.

Like capitals, museums, or concert halls, religious sanctuaries serve a significant function. They are the unique spaces we set aside for our “meetings” with God through prayer, study, and sharing with others. Does that mean that they are the only places where “God dwells”? Of course not. Just as we enjoy music and art in a variety of places outside of concert halls and museums, we can pray and encounter God in many different places as well.

We create religious sanctuaries, however, out of our need for beautiful and inspiring environments where we can find moments for reflection, comfort, and hope in difficult times, direction and wisdom when we face moral choices, and beautiful rituals with which to celebrate the most important moments of our lives. Our sanctuaries provide us with spaces where we can share with others and sense the support and enthusiasm of a community. As the early rabbis taught, our sanctuaries answer our human and spiritual needs.

Commentator Umberto Cassuto sees another purpose in the creation of the sanctuary. He points out that the people of Israel experienced God in a powerful way at Mount Sinai. They heard the Ten Commandments and felt themselves connected to God in a unique covenant. “But once they set out on their journey [away from Mount Sinai],” says Cassuto, “it seemed to them as though the link had been broken, unless there was in their midst a tangible symbol of God’s presence among them.”

In other words, the *mishkan* was a tangible, visible assurance of the bond that God had forged with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. While they would journey to distant places from that wonderful mountain where God addressed them, their sanctuaries with their arks and eternal lights would be a constant reminder that “God dwelled

among them.” Every synagogue sanctuary is an extension of Mount Sinai. (*A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 319)

### Why a “sanctuary”?



Peli

*The mikdash was not a dwelling place for God but a place set aside for people to come and experience more intensely the in-dwelling presence of God in the world at large. It represented a way of re-creating the universe in the center of which is God. (Pinchas H. Peli, “Torah Today,” in the Jerusalem Post, February 20, 1988)*

*Our sages believed that the building of holy palaces, the exercise of piety, prepares the heart for godliness. People who build sanctuaries are more likely to feel the spirit of holiness, the mood of sanctity. (Jacob J. Weinstein, The Place of Understanding, Bloch Publishing Company, New York, 1959, p. 58)*

*If you would know the mystic source from where  
Your persecuted people facing slaughter drew  
In evil days the strength and fortitude  
To meet grim death with joy, and bare the neck  
To every sharpened blade and lifted ax . . .  
If you would know the bosom where streamed  
Your people’s tears, its heart and soul and  
gall . . .*

*If you would know the fortress where  
Your ancestors carried to a safe haven  
Their Torah scrolls,  
The sacred treasure of their yearning  
souls . . .*

*If you would know the shelter which preserved  
Immaculate, your people’s spirit . . .  
Then go to the house of prayer. . . . (Chaim  
Nachman Bialik)*



Hirsch

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch offers another view of the Torah's command "And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." For Hirsch, the *mikdash* symbolizes the unique relationship between the Jewish people and God. The people create the sanctuary when they seek to shape their lives with the commandments of Torah. And the direct result of fulfilling all the commandments is that God's "protecting and blessing-giving presence" is experienced in their "private and national lives." The sanctuary is much more than a building. It is a symbol reminding Jews of their covenant relationship to God. If they observe the mitzvot of their contract with God, then their "reward" will be the joy of knowing that God dwells among them. (Commentary to Exodus 25:8)

Rabbi Morris Adler differs from Samson Raphael Hirsch in his discussion of the sanctuary. Rather than seeing it as a symbol, Adler emphasizes its important functions. He identifies four "tasks" for the ancient *mikdash* and for the modern synagogue.

The first is "to conserve, to guard against oblivion the great insights and concepts that have been developed" by human beings through the ages. Adler points out that new generations often destroy their past, and it is the role of religion to preserve "the accumulation of insights" of human wisdom. Our religious sanctuaries proclaim, "Do not destroy the ancient landmarks."

The second task of the sanctuary "is to scrutinize, to criticize, to evaluate." Religious sanctuaries, Adler argues, must constantly present "an ethical code that does not surrender to expediency, that does not give way to hysteria, that sees the problems of our time from the perspective of a great background of experience and faith."

The third function of the sanctuary is "to enlarge the lives of people." Religion seeks to tell people, "Do not starve yourself by limiting yourself only to the struggle for a livelihood. Do not become the prisoner of your own ego."

Finally, Adler says that "the Jewish sanctuary seeks to remind the Jewish community that what keeps Jews together is not a common sorrow . . . is not charity, not defense, but common history, common culture, and common hope." (*The Voice Still Speaks*, Bloch Publishing Company, New York, 1969, pp. 175-178)

Throughout the ages, the *mikdash*, or "temple," "synagogue," has functioned as a *bet tefilah*, "a house of prayer," a *bet midrash*, "a house of study," and a *bet kneset*, a "house of meeting." It has been the sacred space where Jews have worshiped and celebrated together, educated themselves and new generations, and met to face new challenges. It is the meeting place between God and the Jewish people. Today, the synagogue, like the ancient *mikdash*, remains the most significant institution of Jewish life; it is the guarantor of Jewish tradition and survival.

### PEREK BET: "Exactly as I Show You . . . So Shall You Make It"

Following the commandment to construct the *mikdash*, the Torah presents several chapters containing hundreds of detailed descriptions of every object and material to be used in the building of the ancient sanctuary. The text reads like a combination architect's blue print and decorator's design.

For example, we read that the sanctuary planks should be made of acacia wood, each plank ten cubits in length and a cubit and a half in width. We are informed that there should be twenty planks on both the north and south sides and six on the front and rear sides. Each plank is to have two silver sockets and two tenons overlaid with gold.

The same attention to details is given to the creation of the curtain, the ark, the altar, and all other aspects of the sanctuary. With each description we are given specific measurements, colors, instructions about the various materials to be used, and how the ancient tent is to be fastened together.

Why? Why all this attention to details? Why does the Torah present God as concerned about every single item used in the creation of the sanctuary?



Sarna

Bible scholar Nahum Sarna explains that the Torah's detailed description of the sanctuary "belongs to a common Near Eastern genre of temple building reports." In other words, such descriptions were common among ancient peoples, who believed that God ordered every feature and design of their sacred shrines. So what we have here is not surprising or even special. It is similar to other temple plans passed on within the religions and cultures of the Middle East.



Abravanel

Many other commentators disagree. Through the ages, various rabbinic scholars saw in the details of the sanctuary many different meanings. Don Isaac Abravanel, for example, maintains that the entire sanctuary and each of its parts have "allegorical meaning." When the Torah speaks about the *mikdash*, it is not only describing a sacred building in which worship takes place but it also has in mind the body of each human being. That is to say, each human being is a sacred sanctuary. Each detail, Abravanel explains, teaches an ethical lesson meant to guide people in their relationships with one another and with God.

As an example of his allegorical explanation, Abravanel points out that the *menorah* is made of "pure gold," teaching the truth that one must be careful of impure ideas. He also suggests that the *menorah* is to be placed so that it faces the Holy of Holies. The placement reminds us that true wisdom is always in harmony with the teachings of Torah.

Agreeing with Abravanel's allegorical approach, other commentators provide a number of fascinating insights about the meanings of the various sanctuary details.

Moshe ben Adrianopolis Alshekh compares the *menorah* to the "human soul," which also provides light. Just as the *menorah* is made of "beaten gold,"

so human beings "can only become a lamp of pure gold through the cleansing and refining effect of suffering." When one learns humility—not to answer back with anger and insults but rather with kind, pure, caring words—then one becomes like the *menorah*, full of light for others.

Describing the ark, the Torah informs us that it was to be overlaid with gold on the outside and inside. Why, some teachers ask, should gold, which would not be seen, be used inside? Is that not a waste of precious metal?

In answer, early Jewish teachers suggest the principle *tocho kevaro*, "the outside must match the inside." As Rabbi Hillel Silverman comments: "This is the true meaning of integrity. A person's exterior—words and deeds—must reflect his inner being and character. We must mean what we say, and say what we mean." (*From Week to Week*, p. 74)

Basing his own comments on those of both Rashi and Nachmanides, Joseph of Piavinitz seeks to explain why the description for the cherubim, the two angel-like creatures placed above the ark, includes the command "They shall face each other. . . ." Again, his interpretation is allegorical. The cherubim are symbols for how God wants human beings to care about one another. They are to make an effort to see one another, to understand what brings pain or joy into one another's lives. It is forbidden to turn away, to avoid others, to practice indifference. Like the cherubim, human beings are meant to serve God by keeping their eyes upon the needs of others.

Samson Raphael Hirsch offers another view. He observes that the description of the ark includes details about the poles used to carry it from one place to another. The Torah says, "The poles shall not be removed." "Why not?" asks Hirsch. After all, nothing is said about removing the carrying poles for the table and lampstand of the sanctuary. Why are the poles of the ark singled out for such prohibition?

"The poles of the ark symbolize . . . the mission of the ark and what it housed," says Hirsch. The message is that "the Torah is not parochial, not restricted to the particular country where the Temple is situated." It is always ready to move with the people, to be their guide, their source of wisdom and faith. Since no one knows when it will

be necessary to move, or where the Torah's teachings will be required, the poles of the ark must always be in place so that it can be carried to where it is needed. (Commentary on Exodus 27:7)

Clearly, Jewish commentators found many significant lessons in the Torah's detailed descriptions of the *mikdash*. For many of them, the Torah offered more than quaint architectural plans or decorative descriptions. Each detail had hidden meaning, and like creative detectives they sought to uncover and reveal them. Sometimes they focused attention on the entire sanctuary, at other times on a small feature.

More often, however, they combined approaches, pointing out that the sanctuary symbolizes all our human achievements. In its details are all the small, seemingly unimportant, efforts we make on the road to our successes. No real achievement is possible without attention to detail. The musician must practice note after note, day after day, to play with excellence. The athlete must stretch, run, and lift weights to compete successfully. Students must gather facts one by one, detail after detail, to master a subject. Genuine accomplishments, like magnificent sanctuaries, are the products of hard work, deed after deed, and careful attention to every detail.

So why does the Torah spend so many chapters describing the building of the *mikdash*? Modern

biblical scholars see nothing special about the details of these chapters in Exodus. They say they are very much like other descriptions of temples found in ancient Middle Eastern literature. Rabbinic commentators, however, look upon the Torah's portrait of the *mikdash* as a sacred work of art. Multiple meanings and messages are present in each detail. The challenge to the student of Torah, like to the student of great art, is to appreciate the beauty and mystery of the object.

## QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Some historians believe that the synagogue was the most important institution in the survival of the Jewish people. What other institutions helped to preserve Jewish life? What important place does today's synagogue play in guaranteeing the survival of Jewish tradition and culture?
2. Given our discussion of the sanctuary, what can we mean when we say that "God dwells in this place"?
3. As we have seen, many commentators interpret the description of the sanctuary and its details in a symbolic way. Review "Our Targum." What "symbolic" interpretations and lessons come to mind?