

Where does God Live?

I never thought that I would be delivering a d'var Torah, with so much of a focus on God, since “God language” makes me uncomfortable. But, when Matilda asked me if I would deliver a d'var Torah and told me the possible dates, I said to myself, “Hmm I’ll give myself a few days to research the parshiot for those dates and come up with a topic.” The first that I looked at was today’s parsha, Terumah, and right at the beginning of it, within a few seconds, a phrase jumped out at me. I had found my topic.

This morning we have read the third triennial section of Terumah (Gifts). It is a continuation of a series of detailed instructions from Adonai through Moses to the Israelite people for the construction and functioning of the Mishkan. These instructions continue through to the end of the Book of Exodus, interrupted only by the episode of the Golden Calf. However, I wish to focus on the phrase “*Make Me a Sanctuary so That I may Dwell among Them*”, on page 487 in Etz Hayim, from the very beginning of the first triennial part of Terumah.

I would like to explore the questions: *Where does God live?* And, why does God need a place to be built where He may dwell? If God is in everything, and everything is in God, how can God even be contained in a sanctuary? Why do we need to build a Mishkan at all?

In Hebrew “*Make Me a Sanctuary so That I may Dwell among Them*”, is *Ve’asu li mikdash v’shakhanti betocham* ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם. How can we interpret this request?

Let’s unpack God’s request: “Mikdash”, usually translated as “Sanctuary” literally means “a holy place”, both in Hebrew and in English (from the Latin “Sanctus”): Mikdash is a combination of “Kadosh”, “Holy”, (or, “set aside”) and “Makom”, “Place”, one of the Hebrew names (or, metaphors) for “God”. So, God is

asking Moses for there to be a *Holy Place* where the community can go to be engaged with God. Or, to use non-God language, to experience the feeling of connectedness with all of creation.

Everywhere else in the remainder of the parsha Terumah, and in the remainder of Exodus, “Sanctuary”, or “Tabernacle” (which means “moveable tent”) is referred to in Hebrew as “Mishkan” – not “Mikdash”. Mishkan by itself simply means “dwelling place”. In the phrase that we are exploring, “V’shakhanti” means “and I may dwell”. The root of Mishkan is shared by words meaning “dwelling close by”, such as “shachen”, “neighbor. So, God is saying, “Let them make Me a sanctuary so that I may dwell **among** them.” Or, perhaps, “let them make Me a sanctuary so that I may dwell **within each of them.**” (Significantly, the text doesn’t read “so that I may dwell **in it**”, that is, not **in the tent**”).

From a historical point of view, in the surrounding nations, at the time that the Exodus supposedly occurred, the local god was represented by a statue that resided within a temple in a special room furnished with a bed and table for the use of the god.

The idea in Torah of a sanctuary, or dwelling place for a god, appears to have been borrowed from the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, who preceded the Israelites in envisioning their gods to literally reside in such structures. One example is Hathor’s Temple in Dendara Egypt which was furnished with a table and a bed for the gods. Like the account of Adonai’s explicit instructions conveyed through Moses for constructing the Mishkan, or portable sanctuary, the gods in these ancient cultures also gave instructions for the creation of their “homes”, and also the protocols that a high priest had to obey in approaching the god. The “homes” of these gods of surrounding nations were luxurious with ample use of gold and rare woods, and modelled after the palaces of their kings. Like the Israelite’s Tabernacle for Adonai, the temple complexes of the surrounding regions consisted of an outer court and reception area for public gatherings and a sacrosanct inner section through which the high priest reached the holy of

holies where the deity was thought to reside. Within the holy of holies was a sacred space, like the ark in the Hebrew Mishkan, where important legal documents were placed.

The Mishkan, according to the description given in Etz Hayim (diagram on p. 1520), consists of a rectangular area divided into two equal squares. The outer square contains an altar from which the community, through a priest as intermediary, could reach out to God with burnt offerings.

The inner square consisted of two zones: *the Holy Place* and *the Holy of Holies* (these are the standard, English renderings of the Hebrew “*kodesh*” and “*kodesh k'dashim*”, which just literally mean “*holy place*” and “*most holy place*”). Before settling in The Promised land, while wandering in the desert, only Moses was allowed to approach the Holy of Holies. Upon entering the Land, only the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest (Aaron was the first incumbent), and only on Yom Kippur, was allowed to approach the Holy of Holies.

God reached out to the Israelites through these priests, as intermediaries, from above the ark within the Holy of Holies. But, where is God in the Holy of Holies? How does God get there? Unlike the temples of the surrounding nations, there is, of course, no statue – no graven image – within the Mishkan (nor is there a bed -- Adonai doesn't live there!). God, who has no form, has been leading the Israelites from “a pillar of cloud” by day, and from “a pillar of fire” by night. When God wants the Israelites to stay put, God descends in a cloud and His Kavod (or, Glory) settles, within the Holy of Holies, shielded from the eyes of the Israelites, into a space between two winged cherubim, symbols of God's divine presence and power, at the top of the Ark, where Adonai reveals His commands to Moses, and stays there until the cloud lifts again and leads the Israelites onward.

I have mentioned that the “homes” of the gods of surrounding nations were modelled after the palaces of their kings. (Indeed, according to First Kings, the Temple in Jerusalem, built by King Solomon, echoed the layout of his palace). As attested to by archeological finds, kings in the ancient world were often

portrayed as sitting on a throne flanked by two lions or bulls with eagles' wings and a human face, called cherubim, with a foot atop a box containing legal documents serving as a "footstool". Likewise, in First Chronicles 28:2 King David explicitly states "I wanted to build a resting place for the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, for the *footstool of our God...*"

In the Mishkan, Adonai appeared between two cherubim atop the Ark containing the Ten Commandments. (Or some aspect of Adonai appeared – it was not clearly a visual experience, more like a space where a Voice emerged.)

As God tells Moses in Exodus, 25:22:

"There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Pact, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites."

Let me attempt to address the question that I posed at the beginning of this talk: *why does God need a place to be built where Adonai may dwell?* Perhaps a hint as to why is given by having the Golden Calf episode interrupt the instructions for building the Mishkan with its actual construction. (For any engineers in the audience, this occurs between the Design Phase of the Mishkan Project – managed by God, and Implementation Phase – managed by Moses.) Many commentaries point out that from watching how the Hebrew people panic when Moses leaves them in order for him to commune with God on Mount Sinai, and how the Israelites dance before the Golden Calf, God sadly concludes that the people need a tangible and visual symbol, a reassurance, of God' Presence. Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno, a great Rabbi of the Italian Renaissance, opined that before the Golden Calf incident, the Israelites were able to connect directly with Adonai, without need for a grand structure.

A tradition of studying holy texts together with others has arisen in Judaism. Perhaps the genesis of this custom arises from the phrase “*so I may dwell among them*”, and a realization that, indeed, there is a need for a Mishkan where a supportive community, yearning for spiritual connection can gather to *draw closer* to Adonai and contemplate important questions such as “why are we here?” and “what is the meaning of this life?”, and “what is our responsibility for caring for the natural world?”

The essential features of the Mishkan – the Ark, its cover, the cherubim, and altar in the courtyard – were carried over into the First and Second Temples (Mikdashim) in Jerusalem.

Look behind me. These essential features have been transported even further into the present, to the CDT sanctuary, and into every Jewish synagogue. Behind me our Torah scrolls are behind a parokhet, a beautiful cloth curtain within our Ark – a miniature holy of holies. On top is an eternal light meant to symbolize Adonai’s eternal presence, just as in the Mishkan.

What about the altar in the outer court from which smoke “of pleasing aroma to Adonai” (as described in Leviticus 1:9) wafted to the heavens from the korban, or sacrifice, performed there to enable the community to “draw closer” (the literal meaning of “korban”), to Adonai? Why, that’s all of us in this congregation who have spent this morning praying, meditating, reading poems, and learning Torah – all, to “draw closer” to an understanding of the preciousness of life.

Yet, Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, a great late 16th, early 17th century Hassidic rabbi, in answer to his own question “Where is God’s dwelling place”, answered “God dwells wherever we let God in”. We must make room for God in our home, as well as in the sanctuary; each of us can be a Mishkan, if we allow space to be filled with holiness.

Kotzk tells us that the phrase “Make for me a holy place, and I will dwell among them” says “within them,” not “within it,” in order to teach us that each person is obligated to build the Mishkan in his/her heart, and the Blessed Holy One will dwell within them. (Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, in *Itturei Torah*)

So, let me end with some questions for us to discuss:

What do we experience when we walk into a sanctuary like ours, or into another dedicated ritual space? What is it about the human psyche that drives us to create these kinds of spaces? What is the function of ritual space for us today? Do we need them?

Is it for Torah study; for the sense of community; for the rabbi's singing; for the hypnotic chanting; for being immersed in the sound of Hebrew that draws us here?

Could it be in any old space in which we come together?

What exactly about the Mishkan facilitated a felt experience of Adonai's Presence?

What are your thoughts?

I would like to close with the following midrash from Bamidbar Rabbah 12:3 which, more or less, directly implies that the Mishkan is for our benefit, not God's:

When God said to Moses, "Make me a holy-place that I may dwell among them," Moses (interestingly, quoting from happenings in Tanakh occurring after his death) said: "Who is able to make for God a holy-place that God may dwell within it?! Behold, the heavens and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You" (I Kings 8:27). And it [also] says, "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" (Jer. 23:24), and it [also] says, "The heavens are My throne, and the earth is My footstool" (Isaiah 66:1)!

The Blessed Holy One responded to Moses saying: "I am not requesting [a structure] befitting my power, but befitting yours. If I so desired, the entire world could not contain My Presence nor even one of my attendants. All I ask of you is twenty boards in the south and twenty in the north and eight in the west."