

The Tabernacle and the Creation

Introduction

In this week’s Torah portion, *Terumah*, God begins to give very detailed instructions on how the Israelites are to build a Tabernacle for him. It is a portable sanctuary – in Hebrew *Mishkan* מִשְׁכָּן -- the prototype of the future Temple, or *Bet ha-Mikdash*:

עֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשִׁכְנֹתִי בְתוֹכָם:

כָּל אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מֵרָאָה אוֹתְךָ אֵת תְּבִנֹת הַמִּשְׁכָּן וְאֵת תְּבִנֹת כָּל־כֵּלָיו וְכֵן תַּעֲשׂוּ:

And let them make for Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them. You shall make it ... exactly as I show you. [Ex. 25:8-9]

These instructions stretch over many Torah portions.

The Mishkan is to be God’s dwelling place when He chooses to come down among the people. The Shekhinah שְׁכִינָה, or Divine Presence, comes from the same root as Mishkan: *shin kaf nun*.

Parallels with the creation of the world

The Midrash notes clear verbal parallels between the creation of the world and the building of the Mishkan: [Tanḥuma, Pekudei 2]

On the first day it says: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” [Genesis 1:1]; and it says: “Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain”. [Psalms 104:2]

And regarding the Mishkan, what does it say? “And you shall make curtains of goats [for a tent over the Tabernacle]”. [Exodus 26:7]
[A curtain in both places.]

On the second day, “Let there be a firmament...”, and it mentions division, as it is said: “And let it divide water from water.” [Genesis 1:6]

And regarding the Mishkan, it says: “And the veil shall divide for you [between the Holy and the Holy of Holies].” [Exodus 26:33]
[A division in both places.]

On the third day, it mentions water, as it says: "Let the waters [under the heavens] be gathered together". [Genesis 1:9]
And regarding the Mishkan, it says: "And you shall make a copper basin, with a base of copper, for washing." [Exodus 30:18]
[Water in both places.]

On the fourth day, [God] created the lights, as it says: "Let there be lights in the firmament of heaven." [Genesis 1:14]
And regarding the Mishkan, it says: "And you shall make a candlestick of pure gold." [Exodus 25:31]
[Lights in both places.]

On the fifth day, He created the birds, as it is stated: "Let the waters swarm abundantly with moving creatures that have life, and let birds fly above the earth". [Gen. 1:20]
And corresponding to them in the Mikdash: "The cherubim shall spread out their wings upward". [Exodus 25:20]
[Flying creatures in both places.]

On the sixth day, man was created, as it says: "So God created man in his own image". [Genesis 1:27]
And regarding the Mishkan it says "Bring near Aaron your brother, [the High Priest, to perform the service in the Sanctuary]". [Exodus 28:1]
[Man in both places.]

On the seventh day: "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished". [Genesis 2:1]
And regarding the Mishkan, it says: "And all the work was finished." [Exodus 39:32]
[The ending is marked in both places.]

Regarding the creation of the world, it says: "And God blessed [them]". [Genesis 1:28]
And regarding the Mishkan, it says: "And Moses blessed them". [Exodus 39:43]
[Blessing in both places.]

Regarding the creation of the world, it says: "And God had finished the work." [Genesis 2:2]
And regarding the Mishkan, it says: "And it happened on the day that it was finished." [Numbers 7:2]
[Finishing in both places.]

Regarding the creation of the world, it says: "And He sanctified it". [Genesis 2:3]
And regarding the Mishkan, it says: "And Moses anointed it and sanctified it." [Numbers 7:1]
[Sanctification in both places.]

Other parallels have to do with the Garden of Eden. They are not included in the Midrash, possibly because that story did not have a happy ending:

-God says through the prophet Ezekiel:

You were in Eden, the garden of God. Every precious stone was your adornment: Carnelian, chrysolite, and amethyst; beryl, lapis lazuli, and jasper; sapphire, turquoise, and emerald; and gold. [Ezekiel 28:13]

These precious stones are included in the making of the breastplate of the High Priest. [Ex. 28:17-20, 39:10-13]

-The Cherubim stood guard at the entrance of the Garden of Eden.

[Gen. 3:24] The Mishkan included cherubim:

Make two cherubim of gold ... at the two ends of the cover. [Ex. 25:18]

-Adam's responsibility in the Garden of Eden is "to work it and to keep it". [Gen 2:15] The priests are told to take care of the Mishkan using the same verbs. [Numbers 3:7-8, 8: 25-26]

Why these parallels?

-The creation was God making space for people. The Mishkan was people making space for God.

-The world began with an act of creation. The history of the Jews as a free people began with an act of creation: The building of the Mishkan.

-God and people are partners in the creation and maintenance of the world. As God can create, so can people.

-What is easy for God is difficult for people. The creation of a vast universe took only 34 verses in the Torah. The building of a relatively tiny abode for God took hundreds of verses in five Torah portions.

-Mystical view: The Kabbalah introduces the idea of *tzimtzum*, which literally means "constriction". It teaches that God "constricted" his infinite essence to create an independent world. This constriction made free will possible, and allowed people to earn their entry in the World to Come. He decided not to be ubiquitous, making only sporadic contact, reserving for Himself time (Shabbat, holidays) and space (Mishkan, Temple, synagogues) where people must limit themselves, stop "creating", to make

room for Him, just as He limited Himself to make room for them. (*Tzimtzum* seems to be quantum mechanics by another name.)

After the creation, the Torah says:

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה-טוֹב מְאֹד

And God saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good. [Gen. 1: 31]

After the Mishkan was completed, the Torah says:

וַיֵּרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-כָּל-הַמְּלָאכָה וְהִנֵּה עָשׂוּ אֹתָהּ כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה כִּן עָשׂוּ וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה

Moses saw all the work, and behold, they had done it. As God commanded it, they had done it. And Moses blessed them. [Ex. 39:43]

Moses approved, on behalf of God, as it were. In the Midrash, Rabbi Meir says that Moses blessed them by saying:

May it be God's will that His Shechinah come to rest upon the work of your hands. [Tanḥuma Pekudei 11]

Or HaHayyim: "Behold" is a tribute to the speed of delivery.

Midrash: It says "And Moses saw all the work", not "And Moses saw all the work of the Mishkan", to imply that the work on the Mishkan was the full equivalent of the work of creation. [Tanḥuma Pekudei 11]

Conclusion

The making of the Mishkan clearly parallels the creation of the world. Just as God made space for people, so people made space for God. God and people are partners in the creation and maintenance of the world. As God can create, so can people.

Shabbat shalom.