

Why was the Tabernacle so important?

This week's Torah portion, *Vayak-hel*, continues the long instructions for the building of the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle, or portable sanctuary, or *Mishkan* in Hebrew, containing the Ark of the Covenant, is the prototype of the future Temple, or *Bet ha-Mikdash*. God gives very detailed instructions on how to build it, stretching over many Torah portions, beginning with Parshat *Terumah*.

One wonders: Why was the Tabernacle so important that it had to be built just so? Why so many verses devoted to it compared with other mitzvot?

Let us begin with some examples of its perceived importance:

-The Talmud, the Midrash, and the Zohar all say that the *Mishkan* came before the creation of the world. The Talmud says:

It was taught: The following seven things were created before the world:
The Torah, repentance, the Garden of Eden, Gehennom, the Throne of Glory, the Temple and the name of the Messiah
[Pesachim 54a, also Gen. R. 1:4, Zohar, Tzav 34b].

This means that these things are at the very foundation of the world.

-The Book of Samuel tells us that when the Philistines captured the *Mishkan*, the Israelites were thrown in despair. So much so that 'Eli, a prominent judge and High Priest, and his pregnant daughter-in-law both died from the shock. [1Samuel 4].

-The number of lines in the Torah devoted to the *Mishkan* is far greater than the number of lines devoted to the creation of the world! A commentator has said that the reason is that it is easy for God to make a place for people to dwell in, but more difficult for people to make a place for God to dwell in.

Let us speculate on some possible reasons why the *Mishkan* was so important.

One is to give the people something to do in the long forty-year journey to the Promised Land.

Another is that by keeping them busy, they will not complain as much. The Midrash Tanhuma makes this point explicitly:

A king had an irritable wife. He said to her: "Make me a beautiful woolen robe." She began to work on it. For the entire time that she was working on it, she did not argue with him even once. After some time, the work was completed and she brought it to the king. The king saw the robe and he liked it. Immediately the king began to cry "Woe! Woe!" His wife said to him, "What is this? I worked hard to do your will and you say "Woe! Woe!"?" The king answered, "The work is beautiful. I like it very much. However, the entire time that you were busy with the work, you never angered me or antagonized me. Now that you are not busy, I fear that you will get angry at me again." So said God: "All the time that my children were busy with the work of the Mishkan they did not complain to me. Now they will start to complain again." [Midrash Tanhuma]

Another reason for the *Mishkan* is to encourage community spirit. When people work together for a common purpose, it cements their peoplehood. The Torah says that each person contributed:

Take for Me an offering, from every person whose heart inspires him. [Ex. 25:2]

Not only that, but each person contributed in his own way, making him feel unique. Even in spiritual matters, people tend to focus on themselves. The Mishna says:

Everyone must say: The world was created for my sake.
[Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5 (5b)]

Presumably, this will spur him to take good care of it.

Another reason for the *Mishkan* is that it paves the way for synagogues, study halls and gathering places, which will flourish and shelter Judaism after the Mishkan and the Bet haMikdash are gone.

Many people have suggested that God ordered the *Mishkan* to make the idea of God less abstract, to give the people something concrete to hang on to. But isn't that idolatry, the very thing Judaism came to replace? Isn't the ornate "art" mandated to embellish the Mishkan akin to graven images? Is God saying that concrete objects of

worship are OK as long as they are built “just so”, as commanded? Note that in Judaism, things always have to be “just so” to be valid.

Sforno, in his usual style, attack-is-the-best-form-of-defense, says that God ordered the *Mishkan* as an *antidote* to idolatry, because He knew Israel would soon start building and worshipping the Golden Calf, and so a central sanctuary was necessary. But shouldn't the *Mishkan* then have been ordered *after* the incident of the Golden Calf? Rashi says that the commandment to build the *Mishkan* indeed came after the Golden Calf incident, even though it is located earlier in the Torah, because the Torah is not necessarily chronological.

The Talmud says:

En mukdam u'me-uchar ba'Torah -- There is no “before” or “after” in the Torah. [Pesachim 6b]

Ibn Ezra says, perhaps playfully, that the *Mishkan* was necessary so Moses would not have to climb all the way up to the top of Mount Sinai anymore to receive instructions from God. But, just in case he is serious, one could counter that if a lowly burning bush was good enough for God to communicate with Moses earlier, why does He now need the gold, the silver, the acacia wood, and the fancy skins of the *Mishkan*?

The Ramban argued that the *Mishkan* ensured that the Sinai experience would last forever, with the Tablets of the Law always visible to all.

Another purpose of the *Mishkan* is that it defines Shabbat observance, and teaches that holiness is achieved through work. Indeed, the Israelites were told not to work on the *Mishkan* on Shabbat. The Torah put the prohibition to work on Shabbat just before the commandment of building the *Mishkan*. Rashi says that that was to teach us that the *Mishkan* does not override Shabbat. Therefore, the 39 categories of work involved in building the *Mishkan* *define* the 39 activities, or melachot, prohibited on Shabbat [Shabbat 73a].

Another teaching is that everything connected with the *Mishkan* has some deep significance. For example, the Torah says:

And you shall overlay [the Ark] with pure gold, inside and outside, [Ex. 25:11] from which the Talmud concludes:

Any Torah scholar whose interior is not like his exterior is not a Torah scholar. [Yoma 72b]

You must practice what you preach to be effective.

The Torah says:

And the cherubim shall stretch out their wings on high... and their faces shall look one to another [Ex. 25:20]

And the Talmud asks:

But [how come] in another verse it says, "They faced [the walls of] the room" [2Chronicles 3:13] ? [It means that] when the people of Israel fulfilled God's will, the cherubim would face each other; and when the people of Israel did not fulfill God's will, the cherubim would face the walls of the room. [Bava Batra 99a]

The Torah says:

And you shall make an Altar..and... overlay it with copper [Ex. 27:1-2]

And the Midrash asks:

Why copper? Just like copper tarnishes but can be scrubbed clean, so the people of Israel sin, but can repent and are forgiven. [Midrash HaGadol]

The *Mishkan* also teaches us why certain things were created. For example, the Torah says:

And you shall make a covering... of *tachash* skins [Ex. 26:14]

And the Talmud comments:

The *tachash* was a multi-colored animal, created specifically for the Tabernacle and existed only at that time. Rabbi Hoshaya taught that it was a one-horned animal. [Yerushalmi Shabbat 16b-17a].

Shades of the unicorn!

The Torah says:

This is the offering that you shall take from them: Gold... [Ex. 25:3]

And the Midrash comments:

The world was not considered worthy to make use of gold. So why was it created? For the Mishkan. [Ex. Rabbah 35:1]

The Torah says:

And you shall make boards for the Tabernacle of shittim wood [Ex. 26:15]

And the Midrash comments:

How did the Children of Israel obtain wood in the desert? Rabbi Tanchuma explained: Our father Jacob foresaw with his holy spirit that Israel was destined to build a Sanctuary in the desert. So he brought cedars to Egypt and planted them [there], and instructed his children to take them along when they left Egypt. [Rashi, quoting Midrash Tanchuma]

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the *Mishkan* teaches us that God and people are partners in the creation and maintenance of the world. Why? Because the Midrash notes clear verbal parallels between the Creation of the world and the building of the *Mishkan* [Midrash Tanchuma, Pekudei 2]. Here is the relevant passage in the Midrash:

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]. He formed him with dignity.

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.]

Now, back to our original question: Why was the Tabernacle so important? Rabbi Berel Wein, a prominent modern commentator, notes that many answers have been proposed (and I have described some of them here), but few answers have been truly satisfactory. And he concludes: **“The matter remains a mystery!”**

Shabbat shalom.