

## Where is God?

This week's Torah portion, *Terumah*, deals with the Israelites building the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle. It begins with:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to the children of Israel... [and tell them to] make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst..." [Exodus 25:1-2,8]

A few chapters later, still in the Book of Exodus, God says:

And I will dwell among the Children of Israel and I will be their God. [Exodus 29:45].

What does this mean? Does God really need a place to stay? Aren't we taught that God is ubiquitous, that He is everywhere? When King Solomon built the first Temple, the *Bet Hamikdash*, the successor of the *Mishkan*, he said,

The heavens, and the heavens above them, cannot contain You, [O God], how much less this house that I have built. [1Kings 8:27]

The Midrash says that Moses questioned how the Almighty could dwell in the small *Mishkan*, if His Glory fills heaven and earth.

God replied: I do not think as humans think...I could even confine My Presence to one square cubit. [Exodus Rabbah 34:1]

In the Talmud, God is frequently referred to as *Ha-Makom*, which means "The Place", and is translated as "The Omnipresent", indicating that God is everywhere. The Midrash says:

R. Huna said, in R. Ammi's name: Why do we give a changed name to the Holy One, blessed be He, and call him "HaMakom", 'The Place'? Because He is the Place of the world. [Genesis Rabbah 48:9]

This means that God is bigger than the world: The world is contained in God, but God is not contained in the world.

But the Talmud also says that God is more in certain places than in others, in the guise of the Divine Presence, the *Shechinah*, literally "the dwelling". More on that later.

Furthermore, we are taught that God does not have a body, and so cannot be localized. The second commandment forbids us from

making images of God. When we sing the *Yigdal*, which recounts the Rambam's 13 principles of faith, we see that the 3<sup>rd</sup> principle is:

*En lo d'mut ha-guf v'eno guf*  
He has no image or body

Yet the Bible is full of anthropomorphisms:

- May the Lord make His FACE shine upon you. [Numbers 6:25]
- God said: I will stretch forth My HAND upon Egypt, and bring out the people of Israel... [Exodus 7:5]
- Moses received two tablets of stone, written by the FINGER of God. [Exodus 31:18]
- God said: I will redeem you with a outstretched ARM. [Exodus 6:6]
- The EYES of the Lord your God are always upon the land [of Israel]. [Deuteronomy 11:12]
- Thus says the Lord: The earth is my FOOTstool. [Isaiah 66:1]
- Moses talked to God MOUTH to mouth. [Numbers 12:8]
- God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth...and it grieved Him in His HEART. [Genesis 6:5-6]
- God said: And I will take away My HAND, and you shall see My BACK, but My FACE shall not be seen. [Exodus 33:23]
- Give EAR to my prayer, O God. [Psalms 55:2]
- With the blast of [God's] NOSTRILS the waters were piled up [Exodus 15:8]

Scripture also says that God experiences love, compassion, hatred, joy, sadness, regret, anger, or jealousy.

Many commentators do not hide their discomfort with these anthropomorphisms. For example, the Talmud says:

R. Yosei stated: The Shechinah never descended to earth, nor did Moses or Elijah ever ascend to Heaven, as it is written [in the Book of Psalms, also used in Hallel]:

*Ha-shamayim shamayim l'Hashem, v'haaretz natan livnei Adam*  
The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth He has given to the sons of men [Psalms 115:16]

[Sukkah 5a]

Maimonides vociferously insisted that all anthropomorphisms are allegories, and that it is downright heretical to take them literally, as some did before him. He condemned books that took this allegory too far as idolatrous. He is credited with doing away with all vestiges of anthropomorphisms in Jewish thought.

So these anthropomorphisms are there just to make the message less abstract, more personal, more understandable to us. The Midrash says:

*Dibrah Torah k'lashon b'nei Adam*

The Torah speaks in the language of men. [Sifre, Numbers 112]

-In this vein, Rashi tells us that when God says: "Make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst", He means "make a sanctuary in My name", not FOR me.

-The Shelah ha-Kadosh, 17th century mystic, says: The verse does not say, "I will dwell in the sanctuary," but "I will dwell in their midst", meaning, I will dwell within each and every one of them, not in a building.

-The Midrash says that God really meant for us to build a special house for the Torah:

God said to Israel: "I have given you the Torah. I cannot part with her, and I also cannot tell you not to take her. But this I request of you: wherever you go, make a house for Me in which I may dwell." [Exodus Rabbah 33:1]

To reinforce that point, the Talmud says:

R. Hiyya b. Ammi [said] in the name of 'Ulla: 'Since the day that the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One, blessed be He, has nothing in His world [to dwell in] except the four cubits of Jewish law alone'. [Berachot 8a]

So God will return to the Land of Israel only when the Temple is rebuilt. That's why the 17th blessing of the Amidah says:

*Vetechezenah 'enenu b'shuvcha l'Tzion berachamim*

*Baruch attah HaShem hammachazir shechinato l'Tzion*

May our eyes behold your return to Zion in mercy.

Blessed are You, O God, who returns His Divine Presence to Zion.

So now God dwells in Jewish law. Where else does God dwell?

-God is present when people pray together. The Talmud says:

Whenever ten are gathered for prayer, there the Shechinah rests.

[Sanhedrin 39a]

-God is present when a court gives a righteous judgment. The Talmud says:

When three sit as judges, the Shechinah is with them. [Berachot 6a]

-God is present when people need healing. The Talmud says:

The Shechinah dwells over the head of the sick man's bed. [Shabbat 12b]

-God is present with Israel in exile. The Talmud says:

Wherever they were exiled, the Shechinah went with them. [Megillah 29a]  
echoing what Joshua told Israel before they entered the Holy Land:  
*Hazzak ve-ematz* - Be strong and of good courage. Do not be afraid, and  
do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.  
[Joshua 1:9]

-God is with those who mourn the dead. The traditional formula for  
comforting mourners is:

*HaMakom y'nachem etchem b'toch she-ar aveley Tzion v'Yerushalayim.*  
May God comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.  
Note that here God is referred to as "The Place." People who have  
lost loved ones often feel that God has abandoned them. So we  
remind them that God is also standing where they are standing.

-God is in the smallest and most insignificant places. In the Book of  
Kings, the prophet Elijah, *Eliahu HaNavi*, is told to go to Mount Sinai,  
where the Torah was revealed:

...and a great and strong wind tore the mountains, and broke the rocks in  
pieces... but the Lord was not in the wind.  
And after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake.  
And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire.  
And after the fire a still small voice... and [there was the Lord, and He]  
said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' [1Kings 19:11-12]

So where is God NOT to be found? The Talmud says:

The Divine Presence does not rest upon people through gloom, nor  
through laziness, nor through silliness, nor through levity, nor through talk,  
nor through idle chatter, but only through a matter of joy in connection with  
a commandment, as it is said [in the Book of Kings], "[And Elisha  
said:]...Bring me a minstrel. And it came to pass, that when the minstrel  
played, the hand of the Lord came upon him." [2Kings 3:15] [Shabbat 30b]

The Kotzker Rebbe, 19th century Hassidic sage, said, "God is only  
where you let Him in." He was reportedly only five years old when he  
said this!

So we can conclude that, although God Himself said we can't really  
understand, God is "more likely", as it were, to be found wherever  
Jews follow commandments, or are in distress, or do things of which  
God approves. This brings to mind the modern theory of quantum  
mechanics, where presence anywhere is a matter of probability!

I usually don't like to end on a light note, but this one was too good to pass up:

God is in Coke: He's the real thing.  
God is in Bayer Aspirin: He works miracles.  
God is in Hallmark Cards: He cares enough to send His very best.  
God is in General Electric: He brings good things to life.  
God is in Walmart: He has everything.  
God is in Delta Airlines: He's ready when you are.  
God is in Allstate Insurance: You're in good hands with Him.  
God is in Dial Soap: Aren't you glad you have Him?  
God is in a De Beers diamond: He is forever.  
God is in Maxwell House coffee: Good to the last drop.  
God is in the American Express card: Don't leave home without Him.  
God is in the Energizer Bunny: He keeps going and going and going.  
God is in the US Postal Service: Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays Him from the swift completion of His self-appointed rounds.

-And He just decided not to do it on Shabbat anymore!

Shabbat shalom.