

Parshat Terumah 5777

Why was there a need for a Mishkan?

From parshat Terumah until the end of sefer Shemot, the Torah focuses on the intricate details of the instructions to build the Mishkan and its actual construction. In parshat Terumah, we are told: **“They shall make for Me a מִקְדָּשׁ, so that I may dwell among them” (Shemot 25/8).** As Rashi explains, the Jewish people are being commanded to build a place to house the sanctity of Hashem. The fundamental question with which the classical meforshim deal is: why was there a need for a Mishkan? Shlomo Hamelech framed this question in reference to the first Beis Hamikdash: **“Behold, the heavens, even the highest heavens cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built” (Melachim 1: 8/27).** Furthermore, Yeshayahu Hanavi quotes Hashem as saying: **“The Heavens are My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where is the house you would build for Me? Where is My place of rest?” (Yeshayahu: 66/1).** In fact, it is strange that immediately after Matan Torah, in which the Torah forbids us from assigning physical attributes to Hashem, it issues this command, which appears to confine Hashem to a physical location. The need for a mishkan broadly falls into the following four categories:

To benefit the Jewish people:

Sefer Hachinuch says that “constructing a Mikdash and serving Hashem in it represent concrete and sustained acts through which we can be imbued with knowledge of Hashem. Just as Hashem wished to send the Jewish people prophets to teach them the path they should follow; He also wished to establish a place on earth which would benefit man and increase his merit. All of this He did out of kindness to us”. According to this understanding, the reason why the Jewish people had to build the Mishkan was simply because they were commanded to. The more numerous and complex the details of its construction, the greater would be the merits for its fulfilment. The phrase **“as the Lord had commanded Moses”** is repeated many times - nothing was made by human initiative.

Need for tangible intermediary:

Midrash Rabbah (Shemot 34) states “when Hashem gave Israel the Torah, they would not have survived His approaching them in His full might; as the People said “If we hear the voice of Hashem any more we shall die”. The People were not able to endure the intensity of the direct revelation and asked for Moshe Rabbeinu to intermeditate. The fact that the people sank to the depths of building a golden calf shortly after the ultimate spiritual experience of Matan Torah shows man’s limited ability to grasp abstract concepts and therefore the need for a tangible Mishkan through which to relate to the service of Hashem.

Rambam, in Moreh Nevuchim, emphasises the functional aspects of the Mishkan, especially the offering of korbanot on the mizbe’ach. He suggests that the purpose of sacrificial practice was only a first step in fully weaning the Jewish people off their idolatrous experiences in Egypt. The long-term goal was for them to arrive at a refined understanding that the purpose of serving Hashem is to become spiritually close to Him, without intermediaries.

Indication of closeness of Hashem to the Jewish people:

Midrash Tanchuma offers another rationale. This command, while written following Matan Torah, was given to the Jewish people only after the sin of the golden calf. Its purpose was to demonstrate to the nations of the world that the Jewish people had been forgiven for the sin of the golden calf. The pasuk states: **“so that I may dwell among them”** (rather than “dwell in it”) i.e. even after committing the sin of the golden calf, Hashem demonstrated that He would still dwell among the Jewish people.

Abarbanel views the building of the Mishkan as a symbolic act. Its purpose was to instil into Bnei Israel the knowledge that Hashem resides not only in Heaven but also on earth. Through commanding the Jewish people to build a physical structure in which the Shechinah could dwell, Hashem wanted the people to clearly acknowledge that He dwells among them and constantly watches over them.

Ramban, in his introduction to sefer Shemot, views the building of the Mishkan as an event that brought the Jewish people closer to Hashem and restored them to the level of the Avot. This, he says, was the goal of yetziat mitzrayim. Only after the Jewish people had received the Torah at Har Sinai and then constructed the Mishkan, could Hashem once more allow His Presence to reside amongst them. The yirat Hashem that the People had felt at Matan Torah did not persist; shortly afterwards they sinned with the golden calf. In contrast, the Mishkan was able to instil into the People ahavat Hashem which was more persistent in nature.

Restoration of harmony:

Chazal compare the two acts of creation mentioned in the Torah: Hashem’s creation of the universe and the Jewish people’s creation of the Mishkan. The Midrash states “on the day the Mishkan was inaugurated, there was joy before the Holy One blessed be He, as on the day when heaven and earth were created”. After the sin of Adam and Chava, the harmony between humanity and Hashem had been broken. In some sense, the Mishkan was able to restore this harmony.