

Parashat Terumah - Exodus 25:1-27:19 Rabbi Yael Ridberg



Beginning this week in *Parashat Terumah*, the last 1/3 of the book of Exodus is devoted to the details of the building of the *mishkan*, the Tabernacle that traveled with the Israelites in the wilderness. The drama of the giving and receiving of the law now over, the sacred project of building this portable sanctuary begins.

The details of the materials, the colors, and the measurements taken are the elaborate instructions that fill the text. The use of metals, yarns, skins, wood, oil, spices, and gems symbolically offer another creation in seven parts. The verb used for making, *la'asot*, is repeated throughout these chapters: “make me a sanctuary”, “make/do the Sabbath”, “make for us a God.” It contrasts with God’s creative endeavors in Genesis. As the Torah imagines God made the world out of the chaos of the universe, now it imagines the people made a home for God with their freedom from the chaos of slavery.

The *mishkan* was meant to be a permanent but portable representation of the revelation they experienced at Sinai. The portion opens with the powerful divine command that all Israelites whose hearts move them are to bring gifts to build a sanctuary for God to dwell *among* the people. Not only a signifier of the past, the *mishkan* served as a symbol of what might be.

In a touching *midrash*, the rabbis teach that the Tabernacle was built in response to a human need *to build something for God*. The Tabernacle is not a gift *to* God, but the opportunity to build it, is a gift *from* God. The potential for the people to experience their connections to one another and to the covenant just established by the Ten Commandments and subsequent laws is palpable. The sanctuary was to be a place for the Israelites to experience the presence of God by remembering their efforts to create it.

The *building* does not possess intrinsic holiness, as God is not imagined to wish to dwell in *it*.” The Hebrew phrase *v’shachanti b’tocham*, means “I will dwell amidst them.” *B’tocham* can also be rendered as in the midst of their innermost place, the hollow of the soul that God wishes to fill- the sacred center of the people that comes to life through testimony, connection, and holiness. Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk taught that the text says: “among them” and not “within it” in order to teach that each person must build a sanctuary within her or his heart; then God’s presence will dwell among them. When the Kotzker Rebbe was asked, “Where does God dwell?”, he answered, “In every place we let God in.”

Building the *mishkan* was a way for the Israelites to have a constant reminder of what was and could be again. In the building of the *mishkan*, the people worked to create the sacred space themselves that would, in turn, invite the divine.