



## WEEKLY PARASHA

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**What's the Point?**

The building of the Mishkan is finally completed as the book of Shemot draws to a close. This climax has been in the making for a long while; practically half of Shemot is devoted to the commands and building of the Mishkan. The emphasis that the Torah gives to the Mishkan is understandable. The Israelites experienced God directly at Mt. Sinai, but now they had to travel forth and enter into the land of Israel. The crucial question at this moment was how they could continue to have God in their midst. True, they could live observing the many commandments God had given them, but in itself, that would not make God a felt presence in their lives. To connect to God and not just God's commandments, a Mishkan had to be built.

The Mishkan enabled the people of Israel to feel God's presence in a very real way. When they were commanded to build the Mishkan, they were told, "They shall make me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst." Now that it was complete, God's presence inhabited the Mishkan, and the promise became a concrete reality: "... So Moshe finished the work. Then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle" (Shemot, 40:33–34). For us, however, this is not the world we live in. God's presence is not made real in a divine cloud. What can we do to have God dwell in our midst?

The first answer is that we must work to build something. The Israelites had left Egypt—a foreign country with a foreign culture and foreign laws—and they had to form themselves into a nation. A new system of laws was not going to be enough; they needed a vision, a sense of identity and purpose. This began before the Ten Commandments with the Divine declaration: "You shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." This is their identity, God's people, a holy people, but it is not yet a vision. What are they to achieve in the world? What is their dream?

The answer to this follows the Ten Commandments: the building of the Mishkan. As God's people, it is their goal to build a place for God to dwell. The second half of Shemot—the building of the Mishkan—can be seen as a counterpart to the Exodus of the first half. They have left one society behind and entered a no-man's land, the Sinai wilderness, to receive their mission. The building of the Mishkan symbolizes and presages their larger mission to create a society that is the opposite of Egypt. This is to be a society with God at the center, not just in the geographic sense of a country with Jerusalem, with the Temple, as its capital, but in the religious sense, a society that is more Godly, that works to see God's truths realized in the world, a society in which God's presence can be felt.

And it is not just a society. The vision, fully realized, is to create a world in which God can dwell. Many have noted that the language used to describe the building of the Mishkan parallels that of the first chapter of Breishit and the creating of the world. In the Creation story, each act of creation is accomplished by a divine utterance. Similarly, in the building of the Mishkan, every act connects back to God's command, with almost every other verse in this week's *parasha* ending with "... as the Lord had commanded Moshe." When all the acts of creation are completed the verse states, "And God saw all that God had done, and behold, it was very good ... and God blessed the seventh day..." Similarly, at the end of the building of the Mishkan we are told, "And Moshe saw the work, and behold, they had done it as God had commanded, so they had done, and Moshe blessed them" (39:43). Even the word for completion, *vi'yekhulu*, at the end of creation is used at the end of our *parasha*: "And Moshe completed, *va'yikhal*, the work" (40:13).

The message is clear. Just as God created the world as a place for humans to dwell, it is now our mandate to create the world as a place where God may dwell. God, we are

told by the Rabbis, had a blueprint for the world. According to the Zohar, “God looked in the Torah and created the world.” God, at Mt. Sinai, gave us that Torah, the blueprint for the world. The commandments that we received at Mt. Sinai were not meant to remain as a simple personal guidebook for how to live our lives. They were also to be a blueprint for how to build a world that can be a place for God.

The first step in making this happen is to realize that this is our goal. We must not only ask ourselves, “What are my personal obligations?” and “What does *halakha* demand from me?” We must also ask, “What type of society should I be working to create?” and “What does God want for the world?” This means cultivating a vision that points outward, not just inward, one that takes in the larger society and not just one’s coreligionists. It means thinking about deep systemic issues and not just surface problems. It means asking not just about halakhic details, but about the Torah’s values and the Torah’s vision.

But something else is needed as well. When God created the world there was a necessary act of *tzimtzum*, of divine contraction, to create a space for human beings. The act of creating is the greatest expression of being; it is the bringing of what is inside into the outside world. Ironically, though, if the creating is to build a space for the other, then such an act of personal expression must also be an act of personal contraction. It is at that moment of completion, of *va’yikhulu*, that God steps back from God’s work, when God’s divine expression becomes an act of divine contraction. It is at that moment that man can enter.

And so it is in the building of the Mishkan. Moshe finishes, *va’yikhal*, the building of the Mishkan, and what happens immediately after?

... So Moshe finished, *va’yikhal*, the work. Then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. And Moshe was not able to enter into the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud abode thereon, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle (Shemot, 40:33–35).

At the very moment of completion, after all the work, with all

the sense of accomplishment and ownership that must have accompanied the project, the people had to vacate the House that they had created. They had succeeded in creating a place for God because they are able to relinquish their control. Even Moshe, the human being most intimate with God, could not enter the Mishkan as long as God’s cloud was present. It is, in the end, God’s house and not the people’s. And it is this realization, this act of contraction in the people’s greatest expression of creativity, that creates the space for God to enter.

This does not, of course, mean that there cannot be an encounter with God. Once that space has been created, once God has entered that space, then we can draw near. The first verse in the book of Vayikra is: “And God called to Moshe, and God spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting.” Once we have given God God’s space and respected it as such, God will reach out and make the connection that we are so desperately seeking.

I believe that most of us fail in building such a place for God in one of two ways. Either we do not cultivate a larger vision, or we are driven by such a vision, but we never step back and contract. In the first case, we focus on the details and never try building something larger in our communities, our societies, or the world. In the second, we invest enormous energies in going out and transforming the world into a better, more Godly place, but then we do so by imposing our own self onto the world. It is we who fill the Mishkan, not God.

The key test is this: are we prepared to move on to *va’yikhal*, to move from “and he did” to “and he completed”? If we can get to a place where, after we have worked to create, it stops being about us, our work, and our vision; if our work can become something that transcends us; if, in the end, it is not us that matters but what it is that we are seeking to create, then we will have created a place for God, and God’s presence will fill the Tabernacle.

## Shabbat shalom!

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