



Clilei HaChodesh

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Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

The Aron Within the Mikdash

Aliza Joel

Beginning with Parshat Terumah and for several *parshiyot*, the Torah offers detailed descriptions of the construction of the Mishkan and its vessels – the materials, measurements, and instructions. They are the blueprint for the Mishkan, which although temporary, functions as the main house of worship for close to 400 years until the Beit Hamikdash is built.

The Ramban in the beginning of Parshat Terumah (25:1) explains the role of the Mishkan. After becoming holy themselves through accepting the mitzvot at Har Sinai, Bnei Yisrael was deserving of a place where Hashem's holiness would rest. It was now appropriate that the covenantal relationship sealed at Sinai be exemplified in the building of the Mishkan as a continual expression of the *brit*.

Ramban mentions two main purposes for the Mishkan: to be a place where the *Shechinah* (Presence of Hashem) would reside, and to be a place where Hashem would converse with Moshe (25:22).

These two roles are highlighted by two names the Torah uses for the Mishkan:

The Mishkan's role as a place for continued revelation to Moshe, in order to guide and develop the covenantal relationship with G-d, is reflected in the Torah's most frequently used name for the Mishkan: *Ohel Moed* – Tent of Meeting – the place where Moshe and Hashem would talk.

The Mishkan is also called the *Mishkan Ha'eidut* – Resting Place of the Testimony. This name refers to the *luchot ha'eidut* (the tablets of testimony) which were housed in the *Aron* (ark) within the Mishkan. The *luchot* contained the *Aseret Hadibrot*, which offered testimony to the reality of Hashem's desire to communicate with Bnei Yisrael.

The roles of the Mishkan, signified by these two names, are combined in the *Aron*: Moshe heard Hashem's voice from atop the *Aron*, thus emphasizing the fulfillment of the covenant that enables Bnei Yisrael to merit Hashem's Presence.

One can sense the prominence of the *Aron* by paying careful attention to several details in the *pesukim*:

¹The *Aron* is the first vessel to be described, because of its coveted status (see רמב"ן).

²The section describing the *Aron* consists of 13 *pesukim* – the greatest number of *pesukim* dedicated to any individual *kli* (vessel).

³Instructions for the other *keilim* are given in the singular; the command to build the *Aron* begins in plural and only then switches to singular:

וַעֲשׂוּ אֶרֶוֹן עֲצֵי שִׁטִּים... וְצִפִּיתָ אֹתוֹ זָהָב קָהָר...
... וְעָשׂוּ אֶרֶוֹן עֲצֵי שִׁטִּים... וְצִפִּיתָ אֹתוֹ זָהָב קָהָר...

The Ibn Ezra (25:10) connects this wording to the command to build the Mishkan: "וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְתוֹכָם." The same language used in both commands – to build the *Mishkan* and to construct the *Aron* – highlights that the *Aron* is the essence of the Mishkan in its entirety.

⁴Four vessels require *badim* (poles) to be attached: the two altars, the *Shulchan*, and the *Aron*. Generally, the purpose of the poles is pragmatic – to enable the Leviim to carry the *keilim*. However, with the *Aron*, there is an additional commandment that the poles never be removed (25:15).

The Chizkuni posits that the *badim* could be removed from the other vessels for a purely practical reason: they are in "high traffic" areas of the Mishkan and the poles would take up too much space and act as impediments to those walking around. However, the *Aron* is located in the *Kodesh Hakedoshim* – where only the Kohen Gadol enters and only on Yom Kippur. Therefore, the poles won't be a hindrance if left attached to the *Aron*.

Alternatively, the Rambam suggests that the prohibition of removing the *badim* acts as a *geder* (protective fence) to prevent the Leviim from touching the *Aron*. The continuous presence of the poles serves as a constant reminder as to the proper way to transport this holiest of vessels.

The *mitzvah* to carry the *Aron* on the shoulders and the prohibition of removing the poles from it both stem from the same reason: Carrying the *Aron* on one's shoulders, which is demonstrated by the continuous presence of the poles, is a sign of submission to what the *Aron* symbolizes – the acceptance of Hashem's will.

The Netziv offers a more homiletic approach. Different *keilim* represent different aspects of serving Hashem: The altars symbolize priesthood and the sacrificial service, while the *Shulchan* represents kingship. Each of those institutions ceased to exist with the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash.

However, the *Aron* represents the study of Torah, which can be carried with us no matter who we are, no matter where we live, no matter when we exist. It is transportable throughout *galut* (exile), and unlike priesthood or kingship, is accessible to all. The *badim* signify that the yoke of Torah is perpetually carried upon our shoulders, throughout every generation.

Rav Elchanan Samet explains that just as the *badim* are an integral part of the *Aron*, so too the *keruvim* are an integral part of the *kaporet* (cover of the *Aron*). But there is a significant difference:

The *keruvim* are made of a single solid unit with the covering. It is impossible to separate them from it. The poles, on the other hand, are placed in the rings of the ark. They are independent objects and are not organically joined to the *Aron*. Technically they may be removed. Their closeness to the ark is based on the prohibition of removing them. *This is the essence of the difference between the angels, who have no choice, and man, who is commanded to cleave to G-d and to His covenant, but who has the choice not to.*

In truth, man has the ability to rise above the level of angels. It is *our* choice how we utilize the *kedusha* that is entrusted to us. The dual nature of the elements of the Mishkan in general and the *Aron* in particular is a true representation of our partnership with Hashem in fulfilling the *brit Sinai*. What better way to start off this section of *parshiyot* than by empowering us to partner with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* and recognize the primacy of *talmud Torah*!

A Mikdash Within Us All?

Michael Kurin

I often wonder whether true change of inner character is an insurmountable challenge. Parshat Terumah seems to paint a grim picture. In giving the command to build the Tabernacle, God says “*v’asu li mikdash v’shachanti b’tocham* – and you should make for me a sanctuary, and I will dwell in them” (Shemot 25:8). The word *b’tocham*, “in them,” seems improper; the *pasuk* should have said “and I will dwell in it.” An oft-quoted idea that originated with the Alshich (*Kitzur Alshich* 25:8) is that the word *b’tocham* actually refers to the people, that God will dwell within each individual. In fact, the Kli Yakar writes (25:3) that God’s main presence in this world is within each individual. The Mishkan’s purpose was to be a medium through which this goal would become possible.

But if God’s desire is to dwell within the individual, why is the medium required at all? The Sforino (25:9) writes that prior to the sin of the Golden Calf, when a person called out to God in prayer, He would come to that person. Not so after the sin, when God’s presence remained in a central location and each person would have to come to Him. The sin of the golden calf had revealed Bnei Yisrael’s strong need for a tangible representation of the divine in their midst. In an ideal world, God would have dwelled within each person without any physical building, but the sin demonstrated that we would not succeed in spiritual growth or growing close to God without a physical presence. Resigned to this aspect of human nature, God decided to forego the idealized personal *mikdash* in favor of a more practical physical-communal one. This replacement was permanent; the personal *mikdash* was never rehabilitated.

Is Parshat Terumah, then, a depressing reminder of our inability to achieve spiritual growth or strive for perfection without a crutch? A careful reading of the *parsha* suggests the contrary. The construction of the Mishkan, when seen through the lens of writings by several scholars, hints at 3 tools for character refinement.

In his *Shmoneh Perakim*, the Rambam writes that in order to change a character flaw, one should temporarily behave in accordance with the opposite extreme, until that becomes natural, and he will then be able to become moderate. For example, a stingy person should force himself to give money generously to various causes, until generosity becomes an inherent part of his character. Then, he can revert to being generous in moderation. One inspiring aspect of the building of the *Mishkan* is the implementation of this very technique. The sin of the Golden Calf revealed eagerness towards worship of the physical and material. In building the Mishkan, the people demonstrated eagerness to give from the material towards spiritual service of God. In fact, the Torah later says Moshe had to stop accepting donations, since they had already exceeded their fundraising goals.

The second technique comes from the Torah Temima. Based on a *midrash*, he writes that the people’s exertion and effort in building the Mishkan, with all its small parts and details – rather than the finished product, the physical building itself – is what made Bnei Yisrael deserving of having God’s presence rest among them. Gradual completion of the construction project, one small detail at a time until completion, reminds us of the common refrain that deep inner change is best accomplished by baby steps.

Third, in *Hilchot De’ot*, the Rambam suggests managing a negative character trait by channeling it towards a positive outlet. This is also exactly what Bnei Yisrael accomplished, taking the human need for a tangible Divine presence and expressing it via the divinely-decreed Mishkan rather than a physical entity of their own devising.

That the Mishkan is a call for personal refinement may be expressed by the Mishkan itself. For instance, both the outside and inside of the *aron* had to be covered with pure gold (25:11). The Gemara (Yoma 72b) explains this was to represent that a scholarly person’s inner character must be as pure as he makes himself appear outwardly. The gold and silver that made up the walls of our Tabernacle and Temple were extremely important for their aesthetic value. The physical beauty of the *mikdash* emphasized that it contained and represented something of utmost importance, and inspired those who came to visit, instilling within them a feeling that they were approaching greatness. The holiest part of the *mikdash*, however, was the empty space inside, which became the dwelling-place of God. The *mikdash*, in essence, was a vessel perfected to the extent that it would deserve to host God’s presence. This physical communal *mikdash* must serve as a model for the personal *mikdash*, the one within all of us that is hinted to in the word *b’tocham*. First we must beautify our external selves through strict observance of the ritual *mitzvos*, which are external by nature. Like the gold and silver of the Mishkan, our *mitzvah* observance can then show ourselves and others that God is important to us, and can help us feel connected even inwardly. More important, however, is the perfection of our inner selves, making ourselves into an empty vessel that deserves to house God’s presence. This is primarily accomplished by refining our character, in fulfillment of the internal ethical and emotional *mitzvos*.

Far from resignation to human failure, by hinting at common and effective strategies for change, and more importantly through the symbolism of the Mishkan itself, the *parsha*’s message is transformed into one of hope and encouragement that refinement is not beyond our reach. May we all strive to become a resting place for God’s presence.

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