



“The Five Books of Moses:
Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

23 Pekudei—Divine Space

שמות מ

יז ויהי בחדש הראשון בשנה השנית באחד לח' דלש הוקם המשכן. יח ויקם מ'שה את-המשכן ויתן את-אדניו וישם את-קרחיו ויתן את-בריחיו ויקם את-עמודיו. יט ויפר'ש את-הא'הל על-המשכן וישם את-מכסה הא'הל עליו מלמעלה פאשר צנה יהנה את-מ'שה. {ס} כ ויקח ויתן את-העדת אל-האר'ן וישם את-הבדים על-האר'ן ויתן את-הכפר'ת על-האר'ן מלמעלה. כא ויבא את-האר'ן אל-המשכן וישם את פר'כת המסך ויסך על ארון העדות פאשר צנה יהנה את-מ'שה. {ס} כב ויתן את-השלחן בא'הל מועד על ירך המשכן צפ'נה מחוץ לפר'כת כג ויער'ך עליו ערך'לחם לפני יהנה פאשר צנה יהנה את-מ'שה. {ס} כד וישם את-המנ'רה בא'הל מועד נ'כח השלחן על ירך המשכן נגבה. כה ויעל הנר'ת לפני יהנה פאשר צנה יהנה את-מ'שה. {ס} כו וישם את-מזבח הזהב בא'הל מועד לפני הפר'כת. כז ויקטר עליו קט'רת סמים פאשר צנה יהנה את-מ'שה. {ס} כח וישם את-מסך הפתח למשכן. כט ואת מזבח הע'לה שם פתח משכן א'הל-מועד ויעל עליו את-הע'לה ואת-המנחה פאשר צנה יהנה את-מ'שה. {ס} ל וישם את-הכיר'ר בין-א'הל מועד ובין המזבח ויתן שמה מים לרחצה. לא ורחצו מ'נו מ'שה ואהר'ן ובניו את-ידיהם ואת-רגליהם. לב בב'אם אל-א'הל מועד ובקרבתם אל-המזבח ורחצו פאשר צנה יהנה את-מ'שה. {ס} לג ויקם את-ההצ'ר סביב למשכן ולמזבח ויתן את-מסך שער ההצ'ר ויכל מ'שה את-המלאכה. לד ויכס הע'נן את-א'הל מועד וכבוד יהנה מלא את-המשכן. לה ול'א-יכ'ל מ'שה לבוא אל-א'הל מועד פי-שכן עליו הע'נן וכבוד יהנה מלא את-המשכן.

Shmot 40

¹⁷ In the first month of the second year, on the first of the month, the Tabernacle was set up. ¹⁸ Moses set up the Tabernacle, placing its sockets, setting up its planks, inserting its bars, and erecting its posts. ¹⁹ He spread the tent over the Tabernacle, placing the covering of the tent on top of it — just as the Lord had commanded Moses. ²⁰ He took the Covenant and placed it in the ark; he fixed the poles to the ark, placed the cover on top of the ark, ²¹ and brought the ark inside the Tabernacle. Then he put up the curtain for screening, and screened off the Ark of the Covenant — just as the Lord had commanded Moses. ²² He placed the table in the Tent of Meeting, outside the curtain, on the north side of the Tabernacle. ²³ Upon it he laid out the setting of bread before the Lord — as the Lord had commanded Moses. ²⁴ He placed the menorah in the Tent of Meeting opposite the table, on the south side of the Tabernacle. ²⁵ And he lit the lamps before the Lord — as the Lord had commanded Moses. ²⁶ He placed the altar of gold in the Tent of Meeting, before the curtain. ²⁷ On it he burned aromatic incense — as the Lord had commanded Moses. ²⁸ Then he put up the screen for the entrance of the Tabernacle. ²⁹ At the entrance of the Tabernacle of the Tent of Meeting he placed the altar of burnt offering. On it he offered up the burnt offering and the meal offering — as the Lord had commanded Moses. ³⁰ He placed the laver between the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and put water in it for washing. ³¹ From it Moses and Aaron and his sons would wash their hands and feet; ³² they washed when they entered the Tent of Meeting and when they approached the altar — as the Lord had commanded Moses. ³³ And he set up the enclosure around the Tabernacle and the altar, and put up the screen for the gate of the enclosure. When Moses had finished the work, ³⁴ the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. ³⁵ Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.



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Context

Concluding the Book of Shmot, Parashat Pekudei takes account of the Mishkan building project, its materials and amounts, and the completion of the intricate priestly vestments. When all of the elements are ready, the craftspeople bring them to Moshe who inspects them, and, satisfied with their work, blesses them. Moshe follows the divine instructions to assemble the Mishkan and arrange all of the elements for use, to prepare the priests and the implements by washing, to offer the offerings. Finally, Moshe encloses the Mishkan, and the divine presence fills it. The lifting cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night are the divine signs to guide the Israelites on their journey.

Explorations

The Torah uses a particular formula when concluding each stage in the assembly of the Mishkan, **כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת-מֹשֶׁה** -- **just as the Lord had commanded Moses**". The phrase appears seven times in the chapter 40. Apparently, the preparation of the Mishkan follows the divine blueprint precisely, according to God's detailed intention, every item oriented properly – the erection and covering of the frame, placing the tablets within the Ark, and separating the inner holy place, placing the table with the bread, and the menorah. Moshe arranges the kindling of the menorah, the burning of the incense; he sets up the altar for the offering of the burnt and meal offerings, and the washstand for the priests—all according to the divine command. Finally, Moshe encloses the Mishkan and screens the entrance. The preparations are complete. Here the phrase, **כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת-מֹשֶׁה** -- **“just as the Lord had commanded Moses”** does not appear.

This conclusion raises a question about why the final enclosure is not acknowledged in the same way as each previous step. A hasidic master, [Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica](#) in his famous work, *Mei Shiloach* comments on the issue,

HE SET UP THE ENCLOSURE SURROUNDING THE *MISHKAN* (Shmot 40:33):

When the Torah says throughout the preparation of the elements of the *mishkan*, "According to God's commandment to Moses", it means that the thing was obvious and explicit to Moses, each element according to its character as it was at the moment that God spoke about it to him. As the sages said, every aspect that was told to him, he was sprite to fulfill immediately and for all generations. Behold, up until the erection of the *mishkan*, the entire desert is fit for [divine] speech, but after the *mishkan* is erected, the desert becomes unfit for [divine] speech. Therefore, when the enclosure is erected, that is at the total completion of the *mishkan*, there is no need to say, "According to God's commandment to Moses" because the matter of God's command applies when [divine] speech is clear and explicit as it was at the moment that the Creator commanded. This is impossible with the erection of the enclosure because from that moment, the desert becomes unfit for [divine] speech. Therefore, the text does not say "According to God's command to Moses" in relation to the enclosure. (Mei Shiloach, Pekudei, 32, my rendering)



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From the absence of the phrase, the *Mei Shiloach* interprets that the erection of the courtyard enclosure signals an important change. He suggests that closing in the space concentrates sacredness within the *mishkan*, and thereby diminishes the capacity for divine encounter outside it. The *Mei Shiloach* points out that God reveals a model of the sacred enclosure to guide the creation of the *mishkan*. This model is only available during the construction process. Once the *mishkan* is complete, the divine template is no longer relevant or helpful. The hasidic master does not explain why.

Perhaps the divine template reveals the *mishkan* in its static form—like an architectural model. Based on the template, the Israelites build the physical structure for the sacred service. Just as an architect cannot model the functioning of the building s/he designs, the divine template does not model the functioning of the *mishkan*. Human activity is subject to human will, individual intentions, approximations, misunderstanding, errors and innovations. Therefore, immediately upon completion of the *mishkan*, with the cordoning off of the enclosure, the divine template for the sacred space becomes obsolete, and a new more contingent situation begins. The sacred work becomes both the responsibility and an opportunity for the Israelite community. While the prototype for the structure of the *mishkan* comes from a divine command, the use of the structure—the service itself—is human. It is not strictly speaking, “according to what God commands Moshe.”

Once the Mishkan is ready, the cloud immediately covers it. According to Rashbam, the cloud signals divine love for Israel. The divine presence enters the enclosure. According to the text, the divine presence *fills* the mishkan so that Moshe cannot enter. Rashbam interprets that God's presence completely fills the physical area and there is literally no space for anyone to enter; Ramban seems to agree. God sanctifies it in its entirety, after which the *Shechina* contracts herself, and withdraws to her abode between the wings of the *keruvim*, the cherubs atop the Ark in the Holy of Holies (on Sh. 10:35; see Sh. 25:22). According to this view, the divine presence takes up physical space. Others interpret that Moshe is *not permitted* to enter while the cloud abides (Sforno, Rashi). Ramban points out that this explanation does not fully make sense of the fact the Moshe enters the divine cloud during the revelation at Sinai (Sh. 24:17, 18). Therefore, Moshe cannot enter unless he is called (Ramban).

Looking back at the beginning of the parasha, the Torah uses a word familiar from a scene in Bereishit in accounting for the many materials that the Children of Israel donated for the construction of the Mishkan,

“These are the *p'kudei* (accounts/appointments) of the Mishkan, the dwelling place of the testimony, that was *pukad* (accounted) according to the word of Moses, the work of the Levites by the hands of Itamar the son of Aaron the priest.” (Shmot 38:21)



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The Hebrew root *p-k-d* evokes an earlier *p-k-d*, God’s remembrance or appointment of Sarah – her pregnancy and the birth of Isaac.

“And God *pakad* (remembered/appointed) Sarah as God had said, and God did to Sarah as God had said. And Sarah conceived and gave birth to a son in Abraham’s old age, at the time that God had said to her.” (Genesis 21:1-2)

The connection between the construction of the Mishkan and Sarah’s pregnancy suggests a parallel between the body of the Mishkan and our human bodies. In both cases, God infuses a structure created according to a divine plan with sacred vitality and life, with functions that nurture the divine presence. Sarah’s being enables a mystery of the Creator; the Mishkan is constructed to contain the divine presence. According to this model, our *reproductive* acts construct sacredness and make a dwelling place for divine presence.

When God remembers/appoints Sarah to give birth to Isaac, Sarah’s and Avraham’s relationship is infused with an additional element of sanctity and responsibility. Assured that their family line will continue, they face the sacred task of inspiring, instructing, and initiating their child into their covenant with God. The recurrence of the root *p-k-d* in relation to the materials that comprise the Mishkan evokes this sanctification and links the sacred work of sanctifying space with the sacred work of life-giving, nurturing and educating children.

Questions for Discussion

- Consider the relevance of the Mishkan as a contemporary template for sacred space and service—compare synagogues and other sacred spaces, in terms of both design and function. In what ways do we have access to other divine templates that guide our creative work in the world—in the Torah itself, in Creation—and toward what ends might we apply them to inspire one another?
- In your view, what does it mean for the divine, or spirit, to enter physical space? If you do experience the divine presence in material space, discuss how, where, and under what conditions?
- In the first blessing of the daily liturgy, many Jews include the names of the matriarchs and also add the attribution “*poked Sarah*,” “appoints/remembers Sarah.” Consider whether you would like to add this to your prayers – if yes, why; if not, why? If you already do so, clarify and intensify your intention about this divine attribute.
- In what ways can we connect the tasks of sanctifying space with conception, pregnancy, birth, nurture, child-rearing, and educating? How can we better enable our sacred places and services today to inspire us to sanctify nurturing functions?



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Study Links

For a summary of traditional commentaries on the questions concerning the divine presence filling the Mishkan and Moshe's entrance permission, [read here](#).

Rabbi Shefa Gold writes about the Mishkan as a metaphor that helps direct our hearts toward good work and sacred intentions. Read her views about the relationship between the *Shechina* and the Mishkan [here](#).

[Here](#) is a perspective on the relationship between the completion of the Creation of the world and the building of the Mishkan from the head of the Israeli yeshiva *Kerem BeYavneh*.

[This](#) is a brief prayer or *intention* for conceiving a child that mentions the divine sparks joining human union to create new life.

Summary of Issues

This Parasha opens opportunities to explore the relationship between God and the spatial world—in what sense the divine presence, the *Shechina* dwells among and within us. God commands the creation of a sacred enclosure, a physical place where the divine is specially present. The divine attention and presence in the Mishkan shares some common imagery and language with conception and pregnancy. God becomes involved in peoples' sacred experience.

Methods & Observations

Reading with attention to specific phrases and words, noticing how they recur, and in what circumstances, we can explore intriguing meanings of the Torah. Hasidic commentaries are particularly helpful with this approach—keen awareness of *hidden* spiritual ideas that can emerge from reading closely and interpreting deeply.

Contact

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