

# THE SECRET OF THE MISHKAN

*by Shlomo Katz*

## Parshas Terumah

### The Secret of the Mishkan

**Volume 22, No. 19**  
**3 Adar I 5768**  
**February 9, 2008**

Sponsored by  
The Katz family  
on the yahrzeit of uncle  
Avraham Abba ben Avigdor Moshe Hakohen a"h

Today's Learning:  
Avodah Zarah 3:4-5  
O.C. 82:2-83:2  
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Nedarim 50  
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Mo'ed Kattan 7

Beginning this week, five consecutive parashot are devoted completely or partially to the design and construction of the Mishkan / Tabernacle and its kelim / vessels and implements. R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (Ramban; 1194- 1270) writes that after Hashem had taught some of the mitzvot at Har Sinai - just as a convert learns some of the laws to start out -- and after the Jewish People agreed to do whatever Moshe would teach them in the future, they became Hashem's nation. Hashem had told them to be holy, and they had agreed to do so; now it was time for Him to rest His Presence among them. Therefore He commanded that they build a Mishkan, which would be a house dedicated to Him and the place where He would speak to Moshe.

Ramban continues: The most important part of the Mishkan was the Aron / Ark, the place where the Shechinah actually "rested" and from which Hashem's voice appeared to emanate to Moshe. Therefore, the command to make the Aron comes first in the parashah. Next came the commands to make the Shulchan / Table and Menorah since they are also kelim (rather than part of the Mishkan's structure).

The "secret" of the Mishkan, writes Ramban, is that the glory of Hashem that rested on Har Sinai [in the open] would now rest among Bnei Yisrael in a concealed way. Ramban adds: One who will look carefully at the verses regarding the Giving of the Torah and our commentary to those verses will understand the secret of the Miskhan and the Bet Hamikdash. (Commentary to the Torah: Shemot 25:1)

---

*"They shall make a sanctuary for Me - so that I will dwell among them." (25:8)*

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch z"l (1808-1888) wrote a lengthy essay discussing the symbolism of the Mishkan / Tabernacle, its kelim / vessels and implements, and the materials from which they were made. The following is summarized from that essay. Readers who are familiar with the history of Judaism in Germany in the 19th century and with R' Hirsch's role in the struggle against "reform" may appreciate some of R' Hirsch's points in that broader context.

When seeking the symbolism of anything in the Torah, one must bear in mind that nowhere in the Torah do we find statements intended to teach us about matters that are beyond our own senses. "Symbols cannot represent truths that were entirely unknown to us before." Any lessons we are meant to learn from the Mishkan and kelim are bound to be straightforward practical lessons, not metaphysical truths.

R' Hirsch cites a proof to his claim. We will read in two weeks that Moshe asked to see G-d, and his request was denied, as "No man can see G-d and live." Then Moshe asked to know G-d's ways, and he was answered with the 13 Attributes of Mercy: "Hashem, Hashem, E-l, Rachum, Ve'chanun, etc." Moshe was not answered with abstract metaphysical information, but rather with a very practical description that we are called upon to emulate. This teaches that nothing in the Torah is of purely "theoretical interest," writes R' Hirsch.

The structure of the Mikdash must somehow represent the conditions that we must fulfill in order to accomplish the Sanctuary's real purpose. That purpose is twofold: first, to be the place where our assigned task- "Kedoshim te'hiyu" / "Be holy!-finds its purest expression, and second, to be the place where G-d fulfills His promise: "I will dwell among them." [See Ramban quoted on p.1]

How are we to keep G-d dwelling in our midst? R' Hirsch notes that the Torah does not say, "If you will follow these precise architectural plans and thereafter bring sacrifices in the Mishkan, then I will dwell among you." In fact, three times already, Hashem has rejected the "houses" that we have built for Him, and each time He told us the reason (through our Prophets and Sages). Never was it because He did not like the Sanctuary or its furnishings. Rather, we read in Parashat Bechukotai that G-d's continued presence among us depends on our fulfillment of the mitzvot. R' Hirsch writes: "G-d's dwelling in our midst extends beyond the narrow confines of the Temple. His dwelling in our midst means that His beneficent and protecting Presence will be felt in every aspect of our lives. Moreover, G-d's presence in our midst is not dependent on the existence of the Temple, but, in the

final analysis, solely on whether we will sanctify and dedicate all of our lives to the fulfillment of His holy Will, to the fulfillment of His Law." (Collected Writings III p.161)

---

*"Like everything that I show you, the form of the Mishkan / Tabernacle and the form of all its vessels; and so shall you do."* (25:9)

Rashi comments: "And so shall you do"-- for future generations.

R' Eliezer Zusia Portugal z"l (the Skulener Rebbe) asks: How can building a Temple be a mitzvah for future generations when, at least according to some opinions, the Third Temple will descend from Heaven as a building of fire?

He answers: The Temple that will descend is being constructed all the time from our mitzvot. Every good deed adds a course of "bricks" to that Temple. This verse is commanding us to do those good deeds. (Noam Eliezer)

---

*"They shall make an Aron / Ark of acacia wood . . ."* (25:10)

*"You shall make a Shulchan / Table of acacia wood . . ."* (25:23)

*"You shall make a Menorah of pure gold . . ."* (25:31)

*"You shall make the Mishkan of ten curtains . . ."* (26:1)

As the order of these verses indicates, Moshe was commanded to make the major kelim before he was commanded to make the components of the Mishkan itself. However, the Gemara relates that when Moshe told Betzalel- the chief craftsman of the Mishkan and its kelim-to make the kelim first and then the Mishkan, Betzalel challenged him, "Does one make furniture before building a house?"

Moshe responded that Betzalel had divined G-d's intention. "Were you standing b'tzel e-l / in the shadow of G-d?" Moshe asked, making a play on the craftsman's name.

What did Moshe's response mean? After all, G-d did give the command to make kelim before He gave the command to make the parts of the Mishkan! R' Aharon Kotler z"l (Lakewood rosh yeshiva; died 1962) explains:

The first of the kelim listed in the Torah is the Aron, which housed the Luchot and also the Torah scroll that Moshe wrote. Our Sages teach that Hashem created the Torah before He created the world. Likewise, the Aron is listed before any other item from the Mishkan. But Hashem did not create the physical Torah before He created the world. To the contrary, the Torah was not given until the world was more than two thousand years old. Only conceptually did the Torah precede the world, but not physically. To paraphrase the expression with which our Sages describe the Sabbath day (another "later" creation), "Sof ma'aseh b'machshavah techilah" / "The end in deed was the first in

thought."

Betzalel understood that, although the concept of an Aron preceded the rest of the Mishkan and its contents, the physical Aron was not to come first. It was mentioned first only to emphasize the preeminence of Torah. Because Betzalel divined this, Moshe said to him, "Were you standing in G-d's shadow that you came to understand these secrets?" (Mishnat Rabbi Aharon III p.124)

---

### Letters from Our Sages

How can a person become a diligent student of Torah if he has only limited time to devote to Torah study? R' Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz (the "Chazon Ish"; died 1953) answers that question in the following letter which is printed in Igrot Chazon Ish, Vol. III, No. 10.

"I would like to fulfill your request to help you strengthen your Torah study, or, more correctly, your shekidah / diligence. The concept of diligence is not related to the amount of time that one devotes to studying. Rather, it has to do with handing over one's person, and giving one's heart as a gift, to delving into Torah. One hour of diligence and of yearning is more valuable than two hours of casual study. . .

"The main thing is to acquire the traits by which Torah is acquired [see Avot ch. 6]. The lifeblood of all of these traits is to structure one's thoughts around the verity that everything that befalls a person is commanded by the Power which surrounds all creations - inanimate, vegetable, and living - and all of the wonders of nature, which were created by one Power Who causes them to exist and gives them life.

"Pay attention to the fact that every mortal who was created works vigorously no matter what befalls him in order to better his situation and bring success to himself. A person is given the understanding to work things out for the best, [and these abilities can be applied] to rising to intellectual heights, to appreciating the delicateness of the enlightened soul, and to experiencing pleasure which words cannot describe.

"But, I have gone deeper with my words than I should have, and I now return to the point. There are several weeks left until Pesach [when the semester ends in most yeshivot], and it is essential to take hold of oneself and to be filled with a new spirit dedicated to diligence. A resolution is in any case more effective when it is for a limited time. It also is necessary to pray that one not encounter stumbling blocks, for a resolution which is not pure of improper motives may be a trick of the yetzer hara. Be strong - the stumbling blocks are only in the beginning, as with any test man faces."

---

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with

5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

*Hamaayan needs your support! Please consider sponsoring Hamaayan in honor of a happy occasion or in memory of a loved one. Did you know that the low cost of sponsorship - only \$18 - has not changed in seventeen years? Donations to HaMaayan are tax-deductible.*