

# THE MISHKAN: HASHEM'S SELF-SACRIFICE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*"Take לִי / for me an offering."<sup>[2]</sup> This is what is meant by "A good teaching/taking I have given you. Do not forsake my Torah."<sup>[3]</sup> Ordinarily, when a person acquires some article, does he take possession of the owner as well? Yet HKBH says, "It is Me, as it were, that you are taking."*

To believe in Hashem properly means banishing anything physical in our understanding of Him. It means ridding ourselves of any notion that He shares any properties with the natural world around us. In the fuller development of *emunah*, we come to understand that we comprehend nothing about Him at all, and that He can therefore not be "seen" or apprehended through any of our senses – and therefore not describable through any language of sensation.

The Bnei Yisrael struggled with this in their early days. In Egypt, divinity was joined at the hip with physical images and icons. Moshe faced an uphill battle as he tried to quickly wean the people away from such beliefs, to substitute a refined and profound notion of Hashem for the commonplace one. (This might well have been one of the functions of the Clouds of Glory that constantly accompanied the Bnei Yisrael in their journey from Egypt. They reminded the people that G-d would not and could not be clearly "seen." Man's apprehension of Him would of necessity be hazy and murky.)

After seven weeks of trying, Moshe's job was far from completed. As the people waited to receive the Torah, "The people stood from afar, and Moshe approached the thick cloud, where G-d was."<sup>[4]</sup> That is, the people were still quite distant from an accurate appreciation of Divinity. Moshe alone more fully understood the implications of finding Hashem precisely from within the thick cloud of His obscurity.

The backdrop of Sinai, then, was a people who had emerged from a theological swamp just weeks before, and had not yet left behind the influence of the conceptions of their previous neighbors. The ancient pagans turned lots of things into gods – natural forces, as well as people of distinction. No one could have been a better candidate for such (mis)treatment than Moshe, at least not after the events surrounding *matan Torah*.

The people were primed for theological missteps by Moshe's forty-day mission of receiving the Torah from Hashem on the mountain. The people saw him ascend, without food or drink. This jumped started a return to an old theological fallacy. They said, "This man Moshe who brought us up from the land of Egypt."<sup>[5]</sup> Moshe was a "man," a mortal of flesh and blood, and yet he acted with

divine power! He was human and divine at the same time! The limited and the limitless can coexist within the same being, they reasoned.

Belief in the corporeality of G-d had returned.

The mitzvah of building the Mishkan provided a similar obstacle to the development of proper belief in G-d's true nature. Implying that Hashem's Presence could be contained in place and time gave a boost to those who still held on to the belief that G-d could have physical properties.

Why did Hashem command the construction of a *mikdosh*, since it could lead to dangerous errors about the nature of G-d? Because the gain outweighed the loss. The *beis hamikdosh* would play a role so vital to the cause of the practical observance of mitzvos, that the negative consequences would just have to be absorbed. The *beis hamikdosh* was the quintessential vehicle for blessing the community with internal peace and tranquility. People of all backgrounds looked to it as the central motif of the country, uniting everyone, and adding prestige to the House of Dovid. In effect, Hashem compromised on His own honor in order to maximize the practical performance of His people.

This is the key idea behind the words of Chazal with which we opened. "A good teaching/taking I have given you" For you, the people, it is entirely good, even though it damages My standing. People will become confused by the implication that I can be joined to physical space. "Do not forsake my Torah." I will willingly sustain the damage to the way people regard Me if it will help you stay loyal and committed to My Torah. "Ordinarily, when a person acquires some article, does he take possession of the owner as well?" Does the owner sell himself short? Does he give up his own honor in the transaction? "Yet HKBH says, 'It is Me, as it were, that you are taking.'" Indeed, I am paying a price in order to facilitate the Torah observance of the people. Let My honor be lessened as some of the people lean towards a more primitive and inaccurate way of understanding my uniqueness. It is worth it if they will more readily throw themselves into the practical observance of My precepts.

"Take לִי/ for me an offering." The sense of Chazal is therefore not as many have understood it. They are not doubling down on the word לִי, treating it as if it meant "me," rather than "for me." Rather, they are commenting on the very nature of a mitzvah that would be so easily misunderstood by many. Creating a space to house the Shechinah, as it were, would lead some of them back to corporeal notions of G-d, rather than forward to deeper and more exalted conceptions.

Hashem's willingness to forgo His own honor in order to help us with our *kiyum ha-mitzvos* is a wonderful reminder to us of His love for His people.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh by R. Yechezkel Libshitz zt"l.
2. Shemos 25:2.
3. Mishlei 4:2.
4. Shemos 20:18.

## 5. Shemos 32:1