

KERUV OR KAROV?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

This week's parsha begins the mitzvah of the building a "place" within which God can dwell. The rabbis have pointed out that what was being built here was far more than a "house" for God, so-to-speak; it was a man-made replication of creation, to the degree that such a reality is possible. Every detail of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) was dictated by God, either directly or through prophecy. As Rashi points out in Parashas Pikudei, Moshe asked God how he was supposed to assemble the Mishkan, when the entire nation couldn't do it, which Rashi says was because of the weight of the wall boards (Shemos 39:33).

However, on a deeper level, what the nation couldn't do, but only Moshe could with God's help (and the deepest secrets of Kabbalah), was to arrange every element precisely as it had to be placed in order to achieve physical and spiritual perfection. One board, or even one decoration out of place, could mean the difference between God's acceptance of the Mishkan, or His rejection of it (service of G-d is quite precise). This is why the people felt such a sense of accomplishment and joy (and probably relief!) after God confirmed their success at the end of the Book of Shemos by "settling" over the Mishkan.

One of the many mysteries and miracles of the Mishkan were the Keruvim (English: Cherubim), the angelic, child-like, winged "sculptures" that ornamented the Holy Ark. It was from between these two Keruvim that God spoke to Moshe.

Part of the miracle of the Keruvim was the fact that, though they were built stationary, they moved. As the Talmud points out, the Keruvim acted as a spiritual "thermometer" of the relationship between God and the Jewish people (Babba Basra 99a). One Keruv represented God, while the other one represented the Jewish people; when the Jewish people obeyed God, the Keruvim faced each other "as men embrace one another." If, God forbid, the Jewish people strayed, then this was also indicated by the position of the Keruvim; either they were turned to the side, or, in the worst-case scenario, they stood back-to-back (it all depended upon the degree of straying; see the Nefesh HaChaim, Chapter Eight for a more in-depth explanation).

In fact, elsewhere the Talmud states that when the Jewish people used to come up to Yerushalayim from all over Eretz Yisroel to visit the Temple during the holidays, the kohanim used to role up the Paroches (the curtain that separated between the "Sanctuary" and the Holy of Holies), so that the people could see the Keruvim "embracing" each other. They would tell them, "See how dear you are

to God!" (Yoma 54a)

However, one question that is asked reveals the most important point about man's role in creation: If the Jewish people disobeyed God, why did the Keruv that represented God **also** turn away? Only the Jewish people strayed, so therefore, only **their** Keruv should have turned away.

The Nefesh HaChaim explains that God responds to us as we deal with Him. If we turn away from Him, He, so-to-speak, turns away from us (this is the concept of Hester Panim, the "hiding" of God's "face," mentioned in the Torah). If serve God in joy, then He responds back to us in joy. If we act towards Him with a depressed mood, that is how He responds to us and the world. But the most important point is that, WE initiate the change, not God. (As one rabbi once described it, we sit here twiddling our thumbs and sighing, ask, "When will God **finally** bring Moshiach?" In the meantime, God "sits" in Heaven, "twiddling His thumbs," so-to-speak, and heaving a sigh asks, "When will My children finally bring Moshiach?" The result is a standoff for a couple thousand years ...)

The implications of this idea are both obvious and awesome. Whereas the **non**-Jewish perspective has always been to see God as this overbearing, often egotistical deity (God forbid!) to whom we must respond regardless of our own will, Judaism paints an entirely different picture. Until Mt. Sinai, God was in the driver's seat, and perhaps, He "drove" alone. But something very special happened at Mt. Sinai. At that point in history, a watershed in time, God turned to us and said, "Here! You drive." He then handed us the wheel, and changed seats.

To carry the analogy further, the long exile we have been living through, has not come to an end yet because we have mistakingly assumed the passenger side of the car (no wonder we can't drive straight!). To anyone looking on, it looks like there's no driver! (Fortunately God has a set of brakes and a steering wheel on His side of the car too, just to keep us from driving off the cliff ...). We keep asking, "When will God take the wheel! It's getting awfully dangerous out there!"

God's response was sculpted into the Keruvim, which guarded His holy Tablets that were placed inside: "Me? drive? If that's what I wanted to do, I wouldn't have taken you out of Egypt in the first place, split the sea for you and drown the entire Egyptian army, give you food from Heaven, etc. For 2,448 years I've driving this thing. **you** drive now!"

Another fascinating point regarding the Keruvim is that God did not speak to Moshe from the Keruv that symbolized Him, though that might seem to have been the logical thing to do. Rather, He spoke to the Jewish people from **between** the two Keruvim, from within the air space that separated the two Keruvim. What message does this teach?

This served to emphasize the partnership of God and the Jewish people in the perfecting of creation. It is the Jewish people that provide the "key" to the "lock" that frees the "mouth" of God, so-to-speak, to talk with us. I've often heard it said, "I would believe in God, and prophecy, if only God would come down and speak to me."

God's response: "I would love to talk with you, but how can I when you haven't the ears to listen? Seeing may believing, but **believing is seeing** (usually more so)." Work on your believe and trust in God, and then God will make it all worth your while ... He'll meet you **half-way**.

And finally, I heard a beautiful idea while listening to a Rabbi Yissachar Frand tape the other day. He bemoaned the fact that we will never be able to fulfill the mitzvah of building a dwelling place for God, because as the midrashim teach, the third and final Temple will be built in Heaven and shipped to us whole. What a sight that will be! If so, then God Himself will build His own dwelling place.

However, as Rabbi Frand explains quoting another midrash, the Temple won't come down perfectly complete. It will have everything except the doors! And you're probably wondering, what difference does that make?! What are doors compared to everything that goes into building a Temple. The Talmud answers this question, when it states that it is the doors that create the assumption of ownership over property that previously was ownerless.

Thus is the kindness of God. He goes to all this effort to build a Temple, saving us the trouble of getting an architect, structural engineer, electrical engineer, plumber, etc. (even having to deal with City Hall), and then lets us take responsibility for its existence. This is what God told Moshe once it came time to assemble the Mishkan, "You just busy your hands with its construction, and it will appear as if you are building it, though it will happen by itself." (Rashi, Shemos 39:33).

The truth is, that is the way it is for **all** of life. It always looks as if WE are doing the job, when, in fact, it is the hand of God working behind the scenes. Paychecks come in on a regular basis, but it is God who actually signs them. Realizing this, and living with this reality, is the first step to building the true Mishkan, the **one in our heart**, the one place God truly desires to dwell. Then we can go from being a Keruv (Cherub) to a true Karov (relative) to God.

This is the closing line of this week's Haftarah as well, which deals with the construction of an even bigger Mishkan, the first Temple built by Shlomo HaMelech:

"Regarding the house that you have built: If you walk in My statutes and do My judgments, protect and walk in the way of My mitzvos, fulfilling all that which I spoke to David your father, then I will dwell in the midst of the Children of Israel and never abandon My people Israel." (Melachim 1:6:12)

Have a Great Shabbos, which, in itself, is a Mishkan. For, what is a Mishkan but an environment conducive to spirituality, a place that inspires and generates holiness? And just as the Mishkan was built with attention to detail, and a drive to be close to God, so too must a Jew "construct" their Shabbos by paying attention to the many details of Shabbos. Your Shabbos must also be a "place" within which the Divine Presence can feel at home in ... May we all merit such a Shabbos!

Have a great Shabbos
Pinchas Winston

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