

HOLINESS: THE GOLDEN CALF AND THE MISHKAN

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

And they should build Me a sanctuary and I will dwell amongst them. (Shemos 25:8)

From this verse it sounds as if to "dwell amongst them" meant that the Shechinah had always planned to take up residence in the Mishkan the Jewish people were being commanded to build. However, as the Midrash points out, the Mishkan was, in fact, God's response to the golden calf:

The Holy One, Blessed is He, said: "Let the gold used for the Mishkan atone for the gold that was used in making the calf," as it says, 'and all the people took off the gold rings' (Shemos 32:3)." (Tanchuma, Terumah 8)

If this is true then it raises a question: Did not the episode of the golden calf occur after the mitzvah to construct the Mishkan was given? The Talmud answers:

Reish Lakish said: The Holy One, Blessed is He, does not inflict the Jewish people until He has first made their remedy. (Megillah 13b)

In other words the Torah speaks about the Mishkan before the episode of the calf to inform us that it existed, at least conceptually, prior to the sin of the calf. It had been "prepared" in advance by God, to be ready to cure the spiritual illness that would result from the sin.

Nevertheless, the building of the Mishkan was only a partial remedy for the golden calf, evident from what God told Moshe Rabbeinu:

"Behold! I send an angel before you to protect you on the way, and to bring you to the place that I have prepared." (Shemos 23:20)

Here they were informed that they were destined to sin [at the incident of the golden calf] and that the Shechinah would [then] say to them, "for I will not ascend in your midst" (Shemos 33:3). (Rashi)

In other words, prior to the sin of the golden calf the Shechinah was prepared to dwell within every Jew; every Jew would have been his own personal Mishkan. As Rashi later explains, this changed as a result of the calf because it left the Jewish people vulnerable to sin, an intolerable situation for the Shechinah and a dangerous one for the Jewish nation.

A compromise was needed. To remain among the Jewish people, but not within them, the Shechinah commanded the construction of the Mishkan to act as a temporary sanctuary for the Divine Presence until an actual temple could be built in Eretz Yisroel. Though this greatly reduced the personal experience of Shechinah, it at least left room for sin and teshuvah.

This change in the spiritual reality was also reflected in the Mishkan itself:

There wasn't any intrinsic Godliness even in those places where His Presence was said to have dwelled, God forbid, because it did not unify with them to become one with them as did [the light of] Ain Sof in Atzilus. [This is true] even for those things which are considered to be "holy of holies," like the Aron, the Kapores, the Keruvim, and the Tablets of Testimony, upon which His Presence dwelled, may His Name be blessed. (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 1, Drush 5, Siman 7, Os 4)

Some terms require defining. Ain Sof means "without end," a reference to God's infinite light which preceded Creation, made Creation, and is the basis of all of existence. Atzilus is the fourth highest level of existence. Just like a single soul has five levels—Nefesh, Ruach, Neshamah, Chayah, and Yechidah—likewise existence has five levels of reality: Asiyah, Yetzirah, Beriyah, Atzilus, and Adam Kadmon. Our universe, as vast as it is, resides on the lowest level of Asiyah.

The Torah's version of Creation ex nihilo is called "yaish m'Ayin," or "something from nothing." Kabbalah explains that this means the three lowest levels of Asiyah, Yetzirah, and Beriyah—being physical are called "yaish"—came from the level of Atzilus, which, being completely spiritual is called "Ayin." This is because compared to the physical reality of Asiyah, Yetzirah, and Beriyah, Atzilus is as if it doesn't exist, becoming so spiritual.

As holy as the Mishkan was and the service that occurred with it, its level of holiness was not intrinsic, being part of the world of Asiyah. The incident of the golden calf made sure that the separation between the physical and the spiritual remain, as it does to this very day:

This is also true of the entire Torah that we possess, on which His holy light dwells, may His Name be blessed . . . (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 1, Drush 5, Siman 7, Os 4)

Thus, even the Torah we possess which, is on the level of the Luchos Shnios, the second set of tablets, lacks intrinsic holiness. It must be treated in a holy manner, but it is still not on the same level of holiness associated with the Luchos Rishonos, the first set of tablets. This is because, in the meantime:

His main light is only in Atzilus and above, from which it emanates downward and dwells in the Holy of Holies, as it says, "And they should build Me a sanctuary and I will dwell amongst them" (Shemos 25:8). Thus the Temple is only called "the footstool of His feet," as it says, "To build a house of rest . . . and a footstool for the feet of our God" (Divrei HaYomim 1:28), and, "and the

place of My feet I will honor" (Yeshayahu 60:13). This is because His main light is in Atzilus, as it says, "You have made the most high Your dwelling place" (Tehillim 91:9). (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek1, Drush 5, Siman 7, Os 4)

As mentioned earlier, in all of Creation, which incorporates far more than our vast physical universe, there are five levels of existence. The lower three, Beriyah, Yetzirah, and Asiyah, correspond to the physical world in which we live. Being physical they cannot be intrinsically holy and therefore any Divine light they "contain" is more of a projection of Ohr Ain Sof than the actual light itself.

The realm above these three lowest levels, Atzilus, is completely spiritual and therefore intrinsically holy. On this level the Ohr Ain Sof has unified with reality, making this level of existence totally spiritual and eternal, and therefore, part of the World-to-Come. It is from Atzilus that the Divine light is projected downwards to the levels below it, and it is this projection of Divine light that "dwelled" in the Mishkan.

Prior to the sin when Adam HaRishon existed on the level of Atzilus he had access to high levels of soul called "Zihara Ila'a," or "Upper Brilliance."

This made him intrinsically holy, and eternal as well. At least, that is, until he sinned, at which point he lost the Zihara Ila'a, making him mortal as God had warned him:

"But you shall not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, and on the day that you eat from it you shall surely die." (Bereishis 2:17)

According to the Talmud, the Jewish people regained this great spiritual level when they said, at the receiving of Torah, "Na'aseh v'Nishma—We will do and we will understand" (Shemos 24:7).

Apparently the experience of receiving Torah directly from God elevated them to the point that they were able to reverse the impact of the sin of Adam HaRishon, and become immortal.

However, this too had been a fleeting experience. Like Adam HaRishon before them, they also sinned, this time with the golden calf. Consequently they reverted back to their former spiritual level, and became mortal once again. The Shechinah could no longer dwell within them, necessitating the construction of the Mishkan.

The change can be explained in the following manner. Prior to the sin of Adam HaRishon, the lower realms of Asiyah, Yetzirah, and Beriyah existed on a higher plain, actually overlapping with Atzilus. As a result, the physical world as we know was far less physical and lot more spiritual. Man's skin at that stage of history was more like spiritual light than the epidermis we now possess. This is what allowed him to live forever in his current form.

As a result of the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, all of this changed. The worlds of Asiyah, Yetzirah, and Beriyah descended and no longer overlapped with Atzilus. Creation, consequently, looked more like a five-floor apartment building in which the ceiling of the lower level

functions also as the "floor" of the level above it. As a result, the physical world became exactly that, having lost most of its holiness.

The same situation must have occurred at Mt. Sinai, at least for the Jewish people (the rest of the world had not had the same experience of the Jewish people). The Sinai experience must have somehow given them access to higher levels of existence, elevating them to the point of immortality. They became like Adam Harishon before his sin.

When they sinned with the calf, however, the same thing occurred to them and their world that had happened to Adam HaRishon. Their spiritual stature became greatly reduced, as well as the spiritual level of the world. Once again the world of man became mundane, and the Jewish people, mortal. And that is the way it has remained until this very day.

Text

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