

The Strange Idea of the Mishkan

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Congregation Bnai Brith, Santa Barbara CA

In the Torah this week we begin reading one of the strangest sections of scripture, the chapters detailing the construction of the first portable Jewish house of God, the tabernacle.

The portion begins with a list of building materials. Gold, silver and copper. Acacia wood. Woolen thread dyed scarlet, purple and blue. Linen thread. Goat hair. Precious stones. Ram skins and dolphin skins. Oil. And spices.

An artist might find the list interesting, or a fashion or interior designer. But most readers wonder “why is the Torah going on at such length about **stuff?**” All this material doesn’t feel very **spiritual**. And then the Torah makes the truly bizarre claim, that all of this stuff is to be fashioned into a “dwelling place for God.” What? Isn’t God everywhere? Whatever God is....and to be honest, I have no idea....the Biblical verse on the subject that feels true is “*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, Adonai tzevaot, m’lo kol ha-aretz k’vodo!*” Holy, Holy, Holy is Adonai of the cosmos; the whole world is full of his glory!!” The prophet Isaiah heard the burning stars singing those words in the highest heavens. So in what way does it make any sense to speak of God dwelling in a small tent made of wood and wool and animal skins?

At first glance, the tabernacle seems like idolatry, a system seeking to express spiritual longings but which fails, because you cannot put God in a box. There was a time when I saw the Tabernacle that way, and I hated this section, and could not understand why the Torah spent chapter after chapter talking about stuff, obsessed with the dimensions of the wood and the woven tapestries, and the numbers of copper hooks and silver sockets.

Now I see it differently. I think the chapters of the Tabernacle have profound meaning for our lives.

The Tabernacle was designed for life in the wilderness. What the Torah calls “tohu, yelal yishimon” “chaos, a howling waste.” Wilderness in the Torah is the opposite of civilization. It is the place of no roads, no towns, no farms, no structures....a wild place, of disorder, of emptiness, and of danger. That is wilderness in the mind of the Torah: a howling waste. And in the midst of that chaos, the Tabernacle arises as an island of order. Created by human hands. Fashioned by skilled craftsmen and women, weavers and smiths, wise of heart,

who knew the secret wisdom of taking raw materials and forming them in objects of beauty. The Tabernacle was our first Jewish sacred structure...and island of order in the middle of the howling wilderness.

So what did it look like? The Tabernacle consisted of a set of concentric rectangles, of increasing holiness as you moved inward. A large outer courtyard, about fifty yards long, curtained off on all sides from the wilderness. And within that courtyard, a smaller tent, with wooden sides and covered with ram and dolphin skins. And inside that tent, two chambers. An outer chamber containing menorah, table and incense altar, and the inner chamber, the Holy of Holies. And in the holy of holies, the ark containing the tablets of the ten comandments. On top of the ark, two winged creatures, keruvim, facing each other. And there, according to the text, between the faces of the keruvim and above the ark...an empty space. And there, says, God, there I will meet you. In that empty space at the heart of the entire structure.

We carried the Tabernacle for forty years in the wilderness, an island of order and beauty and structure in the middle of the vast emptiness of the howling wilderness. And in the very middle of the entire structure, a small empty space, a tiny howling wilderness. A dwelling place for God. The entire complex and intricate structure of the tabernacle was all for the sake of that empty space at the center.

Now about our lives.

At our Temple staff meeting this week, we were all asked to take a few minutes to reflect and then to share with our co-workers: what are your top priorities right now? What are you finding most challenging?

Whenever I am asked about my life, the first thing that always comes to my mind is: all the emails in my inbox! My endless list of things to do! The second answer that comes up, not long after, is: the people in my life and in our community who are in crisis. Struggling with grief, or with illness. My mind floods with thoughts of friends who are in crisis, a child with cancer, or facing their own mortality. And then our world. Our Jewish world, our American world. Western civilization. Our planet earth. All of them feel fragile and unstable, and in need of tikkun...in need of repair.

I did not share all of that with my co-workers at our staff meeting. But these are the things which haunt me....a wildly overflowing inbox, friends and family in pain, and the brokenness of our religion, the brokenness of our nation, and the brokenness of our world. I know I'm not the only one.

This is our wilderness, our howling waste...the chaos and disorder all around us.

What is the Tabernacle we build? What island or islands of order and beauty and holiness do we construct in the midst of the chaos?

Our homes. Our gardens. Our routines. Our schedules. The games we play. The work we do. The music we make. Our religion. Our way of life. We construct these islands of order, tabernacles of beauty in the howling wilderness all around us.

But the chapters of the Tabernacle are not only about order and beauty. The entire complex and intricate structure of the Tabernacle, all the skilled weaving and craftsmanship, the tapestries and the ram skins, the dolphin skins and the acacia wood, were all for the sake of that small empty space at the heart of the holy of holies. That tiny howling wilderness, where God met us and spoke to us.

In all of the order and structure of our lives, our routines and our habits, our homes and our institutions, our games and our work, are we able to make an empty space? A space at the very heart of our life, into which God may enter, and speak to us?

Shabbat is that empty space.

Prayer is that empty space.

Silence is that empty space.

Shabbat Shalom.