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Parshat Terumah: Building Hashem's House

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The last few parshiot of sefer Shmot read like an architectural plan in their focus on the physical structure of the mishkan. Amidst the lengthy description of form, we only have one short pasuk relating to function: ח, כה, נ reads “ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם” – make for Me a mikdash, so that I might dwell there. The mishkan is meant to be the house of Hashem. As we read through these parshiot it appears this idea was meant to be taken quite literally. Hashem's dwelling place has the basic furniture with which a house is equipped – a shulchan, an aron and a menorah- a table, a cabinet and a lamp. It has kohanim, who serve as uniformed butlers within the house. And as we move into Sefer Vayikra, we learn that Hashem is served meals in this house – the korbanot - each of which consisted of a main dish, a starch, and wine (apparently Hashem doesn't like vegetables). The anthropomorphism is striking. How are we to understand the idea of Hashem actually living in the mishkan?

In order to approach this question we need to take a close look at what type of activity took place in the mishkan. What is perhaps most interesting about the mishkan is the highly scripted nature of the activity therein. Only certain people may approach at certain times, dressed in certain clothes, and הזר הקרב יומת – *the stranger who approaches will be put to death*. Hashem dictates exactly how we are to serve Hashem in the mishkan, with no room for deviation or individual religious expression. The structure of the mishkan reminds us that we entering into someone else's home; we are guests in a palace that does not belong to us. The Bible professor Yechezkel Kaufman notes the absence of human speech in the mishkan – Hashem may appear and speak with people, but with very rare exception people do not speak with Hashem. He calls the mishkan מקדש הדממה – the sanctuary of silence. Hashem is the master of the house, and in the face of Hashem, there can only be silence. We are the servants, and we do not speak out of turn.

In this week's haftarah, we read of the beginning of the building of the beit hamikdash by Shlomo Hamelech. And if we flip ahead a few perakim to its completion, we learn that Shlomo had a very different vision in building a sanctuary. In his dedication of the beit hamikdash, Shlomo stresses that the heavens and earth cannot contain Hashem, let alone a mere structure (Melachim Aleph 8:27). He therefore views the beit hamikdash as a place of human outreach to Hashem. Shlomo calls upon the people to use the beit hamikdash to express themselves to Hashem at times of need, be it in the face of sin, enemies, drought, famine or plague. And in stark contrast to the strict rules outlined for entering the mishkan, Shlomo lays out his vision that the mikdash be a gathering place for all nations “*And also the stranger who is from the Jewish people and came from a foreign country...will come and pray in this house.*” (Kings I 8, 41-42). The mikdash is the center of petitionary prayer and it is filled with human voice. Hashem plays the role of listener and responder; the people have the voice.



The inherent tension between voice and silence in relationship with Hashem is embedded in our modern experience of tefillah. We do petition Hashem with our voice and have the audacity to make personal requests, but the tefillot are crafted, helping us maintain the requisite sense of awe and distance we must feel when approaching Hashem. But in many ways, our modern sanctuaries are a far cry from the model of the mishkan, in which Hashem is approached in awe and silence. We are perhaps more comfortable reaching out and expressing our needs and desires than standing in silent awe. In describing the circumscribed structure of the mishkan, the parshiot at the end of Sefer Shmot and the beginning of Sefer Vayikra are an important reminder to cherish a sense of humility and silence as we approach Hashem.



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