



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Vayakhel-Pekudei: Experiencing God's Presence

How can a person feel the presence of an invisible God?

This is possibly the reason that Israel needed a Tabernacle. God wanted Israel to feel His proximity. "Make me a sanctuary" He said "and I will live amongst them." (Ex 25:8) The word Mishkan comes from the root שכן like neighbor. With the Mishkan, God becomes our neighbor. God moves into the neighborhood.

And the Tanakh has a remarkable way of expressing God's residence in the epicenter of the camp of Israel.

The closing lines of the Book of Shemot depict the completion of the Tabernacle, and the ensuing moment of divine revelation. God's cloud fills the sanctuary, restricting Moses' entry until he is called inside by God. This powerful scene expresses God's palpable presence. It is the fulfillment of the Book of Exodus. After all, God had promised a relationship with the people of Israel and now that legacy has been fulfilled.

SINAI

Exodus's concluding verses bear a striking resemblance to the depiction of God's presence upon Mount Sinai.

The Mishkan	At Sinai
"The CLOUD covered the tent of meeting, and GOD'S PRESENCE filled the Mishkan ." (40:34)	"The CLOUD covered the mountain, and GOD'S PRESENCE rested upon Mt. Sinai " (24:16)
"And Moses could not enter the tent of meeting for the cloud rested upon it, and the presence of God filled the	"And Moses ascended the mountain ... and the CLOUD enveloped it for six days,

<p>Mishkan ... AND GOD CALLED TO HIM.." (40:34-5 and Vayikra 1:1)</p>	<p>AND HE CALLED TO MOSES on the seventh day from the cloud ... and Moses entered the cloud and ascended the mountain" (24:15-18)</p>
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In other words, God's presence in the Sanctuary is an ongoing revelation. A continuation of Sinai. Nachmanides expresses this idea:

It is befitting a holy nation that there be within their midst a sanctuary so that God's presence may dwell among them. Hence He commanded at the outset that a Mishkan be established, a house sacred to His name where He could speak with Moses and command the Children of Israel.

...The essence of the Tabernacle is that the glory of God that dwelt on Mount Sinai, hiddenly dwells upon it. And it is like it is written there (Exodus 24:16), "And the glory of the Lord dwells upon Mount Sinai," and it is written (Deuteronomy 5:21), ...and so [too] was it written about the tabernacle, "and the glory of the Lord, filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:34). (Nachmanides to 25:1)

The miraculous, supernatural Revelation at Sinai was impressive and certainly overwhelming, but when the occasion is over, what are we left with? Where does Sinai find a sense of permanence? How can Sinai remain in our lives? - in the Mishkan. The Mishkan is the place where God continues to instruct Moses. It allows God's instruction to perpetuate; it means that God's presence may be felt. The Mishkan perpetuates the Sinai experience in a hidden, controlled manner.

The physical layout of the Mishkan re-creates Mount Sinai in another way. On Mount Sinai, several concentric zones were transcribed, each of which have a corollary in the Sanctuary.

Sinai	Sanctuary
The Camp of Israel	The Camp of Israel surrounding the Mishkan
Foot of the Mountain – with an altar	Courtyard – altar
The mountain – access for priests	Inner chamber – access for priests
Top of the Mountain - Moses receives Law and instruction from God	Inner sanctum/Kodesh Kodashim Place of the law (Tablets) / Moses receives instruction from God.

So, as we may see, Exodus concludes on a high note. God who had seemed so frightening at Sinai now resides reassuringly at the epicenter of the camp. Now Israel can really feel that God is in their midst. (See Ex. 34:9)

And so, please discuss

We have depicted the Tabernacle as a portable Sinai.

- Why is this something that the Jewish people would want?
- Do we seek a connection point with God in our own lives – personally or communally?
- Some say that the synagogue plays that role. Does it play that role for you?
- Are there other moments of our Judaism that can connect us to God?

My teacher, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, suggested that Jewish Law – keeping Mitzvot – can offer a dimension of God awareness:

Being commanded entails both an experience of divine encounter as well as specific mandates one must fulfill. There are those who stress the notion of encounter and dialogue between man and God ... This is the Buberian notion of “I and Thou” ... At the other extreme, we sometimes become very much involved in relating to the commands [mitzvot], but in the process, we lose sight of the Commander... Either way, we miss part of the essence of what mitzva means. **To live a life of Halakha is to try to fuse these elements, to maintain a constant sense of God’s presence while striving to fulfill God’s will.** (<http://etzion.org.il/en/mitzva-life-command>)

- When we do a mitzva, answering God’s commands, do we appreciate that we are in fact engaged in a prosaic, daily encounter with God, but an encounter nonetheless?

Shabbat Shalom!