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The Messages of The Mishkan

This week's Parsha introduces us to the Mishkan, the Sanctuary in the wilderness for Hashem, "so that I may dwell among them (Bnei Yisrael)." In today's parlance, we might call that arrangement a win-win situation. For instance, Rashi points out that the institution of the Mishkan was an antidote to the backsliding of the nation into idol worship, as exemplified by the Sin of the Golden Calf. For Hashem, as it were, the Mishkan was a medium to communicate with the people, albeit primarily through Moshe Rabbainu.

Chaim Richman (in his description of the Mishkan) reminds us that the temporary

and portable structure that comprised the Sanctuary in the desert was, ultimately, to find its resting place as the Beit Hamikdash in Yerushalayim at "the place that God chose to rest His Presence for all time." That site was where Avraham Avinu conducted the Akeidah. Moreover, besides the Ohel Moed (often used as an alternative name for the Mishkan) serving as an "intimate" meeting place of Israel with the Divine, the Mishkan also served to demonstrate to the other nations that a people can "live in unity with God in its midst" (Artscroll).

How did the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, "dwell among the people"? From a physical perspective, at each location in their desert travels, the tribes camped around the Mishkan according to prescribed stations. The tribe of Levi, responsible for the Mishkan and its maintenance, camped closer to the center of the encampment.

From a "religious" perspective, the Mishkan was a rallying point for the nation and the place where individuals would bring offerings in the hope of elevating their spiritual status. Additionally, Rav Hirsch indicates that the people's voluntary donations to the building of the Mishkan (see the opening verses of the Parsha)

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symbolized Israel's obligation to sanctify itself in its personal life. In return for these gifts to the Mishkan, Hashem responded by dwelling among the people, perhaps to raise their spiritual consciousness.

For the Ramban, the Mishkan and its many parts were symbolic of the experiences at Sinai. For example, as Ibn Ezra remarks, no longer would Moshe have to climb the mount to converse with God; for this purpose, there would now be a Holy Ark (the Aron Habrit) over which the Cherubim hovered and from which Hashem's "voice" emanated.

The Mishkan was where the twice-daily sacrificial service (the Tamid) would take place, alongside many other ritual practices, including the Lechem Hapanim (the Shewbread), the preparation of the Ner Tamid, and the penance for the people on Yom Kippur.

In any civic training program, we would learn of the importance of involving the people in building community services. Here, we see that the people's contributions were outstanding and a reflection of their generosity, voluntarism, and ready commitment. We can surmise on the

source of the many varied and valuable items donated – the precious metals and gems, linens and fibers, oil, spices, and the aromatic incense – but that is beyond the scope of this article.

Notably, the people were told to "take for themselves" these voluntary gifts rather than "give" to the setting up of the Mishkan. Our rabbis tell us that what the people would "take" for their efforts would be the merits earned by giving to the holy cause (Bava Batra 10a). By extrapolation, we learn of the importance of taking responsibility, of the Mitzva of supporting generously to the causes in our community.

The building of the Mishkan, as we know, was spearheaded by the great master artisans Betzalel and Oholiav, the former of the highest echelons in the community, the latter from simple stock. They demonstrated that whatever our status in society, we can all be pioneers and make that critical clearing in the forest (or monument in the Midbar) for the betterment of our people and this world. ■

Shabbat Shalom!

Menachem Persoff

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