



GEULAS YISRAEL

RABBI MOSHE TARAGIN
RAM YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
MAGGID SHIUR ALL PARSHA AND ALL DAF, OU.ORG

Built Within Nature

The Mishkan is more than a structure meant to house the presence of Hashem or to facilitate sacrifice and ritual. As the House of Hashem, it stands as a religious icon, communicating religious symbolism. It embodies a vision of religious life and spiritual encounter. Every detail—each *kli sharet*, every material, every measurement—symbolizes a distinct facet of *avodat Hashem*. Nothing is incidental. Through its physical form, the Mishkan gives religious experience shape.

If the details of the Mishkan symbolize facets of *avodat Hashem*, then the skeleton of the Mishkan conveys meaning as well. The edifice of the Mishkan was fashioned from *shit-tim* wood set upright, mirroring the posture in which these trees grow in nature. The planks were prepared from trees and erected vertically, rather than laid horizontally as in a log cabin.

NATURAL FORM AND RELIGION

This choice reflects a broader halakhic principle articulated by the Gemara: כל המצוות כו' לן אינן כשרות אלא דרך גדילתן—all mitzvot are valid only when performed in the manner of their natural growth. Whenever a natural object is employed for a mitzvah, it must be used in the posture in which it grew. Thus, a lulav is held upright, aligned with its natural form rather than inverted. The Mishkan's vertical planks express the same concept: *avodat Hashem* shaped by natural form rather than by convenience or efficiency.

This protocol of positioning natural mitzvah objects in their natural form signals that religion is not meant to upend nature, but to reinforce it. The mitzvah is performed in the very manner in which nature presents itself. Religion is not contradictory to nature, but consistent with it.

Just as religion does not clash with the natural world around us, it does not clash with the natural order within us. We were created with instincts, desires, and human faculties. Hashem delivers His will and expects submission to that will, even when it runs against instinct or inclination. That demand can create the mistaken impression that serving Hashem stands in tension with human interest and suppresses human vitality. The guideline to perform mitzvot *derech gedilatan* pushes back against that assumption. It insists that religious life aligns with human nature and natural instinct, even as it sometimes asks us to discipline and restrain them. Over time, a life of mitzvot is presented as a path to human

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welfare and flourishing, not its suppression.

In his sefer *Orot HaKodesh*, chapter 3, *Rosh Davar* 11, Rav Kook argues that when religious growth stunts personal development, it signals a distorted form of religiosity.

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“A sign of pure Yirat shamayim is when natural morality, rooted in the upright nature of the human being, is elevated through [religion] to higher levels than it would reach on its own.” Authentic religious life should expand the human personality, deepening and refining every dimension of character rather than impeding or arresting it. Avodat Hashem, at its best, does not compress the human spirit but brings it to fuller expression.

MISHKAN WITHOUT RUINING

The same message emerges not only from the manner in which the *kerashim* were fashioned, but from the choice of wood itself. The Midrash notes that *shittim* wood—often identified as acacia—was selected precisely because it is not a fruit-bearing tree. The Mishkan was not to be built through the destruction of foods and resources. Sacred space should not ruin fruit-producing trees. The Mishkan must never appear as an act of plunder or vandalism against the natural world.

This comment as well—that the Mishkan should not be built by destroying fruit-producing trees—conveys the same message: religious life is not meant to trample or hollow out the human spirit. The service of Hashem is meant to cultivate and elevate the natural capacities placed within us, not to scorn or dismantle them.

ELIMINATING FRICTION

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experienced and performed. When religious life is experienced as a foreign system, a burden that demands surrender of our deepest interests, enthusiasm withers.

Hashem endowed us with an inner drive toward a healthy and fulfilling life. If religion is perceived as running against that impulse, it collides with our most basic instincts. Once we cross that threshold and begin to see religious life as aligned with our inner nature and aspirations, passion for serving Hashem comes more naturally and with greater ease.

RELIGION ENTERS EXPERIENCE

Religious observance is consistent with human nature. Furthermore, it must be deeply woven into the fabric of our natural experiences. Religion faces a real danger when it is isolated from daily life, confined to the Beit midrash or Shul, and sealed off from routine existence. When religion is compartmentalized, it becomes difficult to carry its meaning into the



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rhythms of family life, professional responsibility, and interpersonal relationships. Religious consciousness must be allowed to breathe within those ordinary settings. We must live *avodat Hashem* not only in sacred spaces, but within the full texture of human life.

That danger was especially acute at the moment the first sacred space was constructed. With the emergence of the Mishkan, there was a real risk that religious life would become localized and that we would come to view the Mishkan as the exclusive seat of religion and lose the ability to discern religious meaning beyond its walls. To push back against that assumption, and to signal that the Mishkan was not synthetic or detached from the world we inhabit, an extraordinary step was taken.

WEAVING ON NATURE

The Midrash describes women weaving goat wool while it was *still on the backs of the goats*. Rather than first shearing the wool and then spinning and weaving it, they wove it directly upon the living animal. This was an extraordinary act of craftsmanship. It also carried symbolic force. The yarns of the Mishkan were fashioned while still embedded within nature. Only afterward were the fabrics harvested and incorporated into the Mishkan. The message was deliberate. The Mishkan was not meant to stand apart from the

natural world or from ordinary human experience. Religious meaning can be discovered both inside the Mishkan and beyond it, in the natural world and in the lived, textured experiences of human life. Different laws govern the Mishkan than those that apply elsewhere, but Hashem is not encountered only within its confines. The Mishkan concentrates holiness, but it does not confine it.

The upright wooden planks taught that religion does not upend our nature. **By comparison**, the weaving on the backs of goats taught that religion must be lived within it.

TERMS THAT FRACTURE

We often rely on the terms *gashmiyut* and *ruchniyyut* to describe different realms of human experience and different spheres of identity. It is worth asking whether, in our religious and cultural world, this division still serves us well. Do we in fact divide our lives into two discrete domains, or do we seek instead to breathe religious meaning into every moment?

There is, of course, an obvious difference between standing before the Aron HaKodesh on Yom Kippur and shopping in a supermarket. Yet in both settings we aspire to act with religious sensitivity, even if those values express themselves differently. Segmenting life into two distinct realms—the physical and the spiritual—undermines the continuity we seek. Language shapes experience, and when these terms are overused they carve reality into sharply separated domains that rarely meet. We risk becoming capable of religious behavior only when we feel immersed in *ruchniyyut*, and less attentive, less principled, when we drift into the world of *gashmiyut*.

Even if we succeed in infusing meaning into the *gashmiyut* space, it can remain disconnected, unintegrated with the deeper and more intense moments we associate with

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ruchniyyut. The result is an *avodat Hashem* that is uneven and episodic rather than fluid and organic.

Should we not instead strive for *shiviti Hashem l'negdi tamid*—a unifying consciousness that penetrates every aspect of life, every setting, every corner of the human condition?

The conclusion of the berachah of *Asher Yatzar* is puzzling. We thank Hashem for being the *Rofeh kol basar*, sustaining the proper functioning of our bodies, and then conclude with the cryptic phrase *u'mafli la'asot*—that He performs an extraordinary feat. In his comments to the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Rema explains this final phrase: we thank Hashem for fusing our immortal soul with our fleeting body into a single, cohesive unit, almost indistinguishable in lived experience. We live life as one integrated whole, rather than through the fractured lens of a divided or dichotomous existence.

The Mishkan underscores this same message. Religion should not be viewed as a system that stifles nature—either the world around us or the world within us. Nor is religious life meant to be confined to moments or spaces that feel inherently holy. Rather, religion is meant to be overlaid upon the full span of human life, encompassing both experiences that feel elevated and those that feel simply natural. ■



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