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Hosting the Holy One

MISHKAN AS HOME

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik was once asked to speak at an intimate *sheva berachot*, the postnuptial celebrations. He began as follows: “How should a religious couple furnish their new home? And I don’t mean the physical space or the furniture. I refer to the spiritual makeup of the house.” He went on to propose that the simplest model to follow is that of the *Mishkan*, the house of God.

Three of its holiest components are mentioned together in *Parashat Terumah*—the ark, the table, and the menorah—while a fourth, the golden incense altar, is left for *Parashat Tetzaveh*. The first grouping indicates some commonality, and Ibn Ezra suggests that these three are the basic elements of a home: a place to rest (the ark),¹ a table for

eating (the showbread table), and a source of light (the menorah).² The *Mishkan*, therefore, is not only a place to offer sacrifices, but a location in our midst in which God can reside, where we can feel His proximity.

If “the Tabernacle can transform into a house,” the Rav reasoned, “the private house of the Jew can transform into a Tabernacle.” The Rav now turned to the bride and groom: How do we accomplish this and host God in our home?

We welcome God into our homes through establishing... the bed the table, the chair and the lamp. Homiletically, the bed represents family purity, the table represents keeping kosher as well as the mitzvah of welcoming guests, while the menorah represents the study of Torah.... And in such a spiritually furnished home, one can hear the voice of God as in the *Mishkan*: “I will arrange My meetings with you there, and I will speak with you from atop the ark cover” (Exodus 25:22). In such a sanctuary, the *Shechinah* indeed finds a place to dwell.³

The many facets and features of the *Mishkan* are meant to inspire a Jew to bring

1. The divine presence would rest on the ark,

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as it says that God “dwells upon the cherubs” on top of the ark (2 Samuel 6:2, 1 Chronicles 13:6).

2. See Ibn Ezra on Exodus 25:22 (long commentary). The Rav finds proof for this homemaking triad in 2 Kings 4:10, when the Shunamite woman set up a spare guest room for the prophet Elisha: “Let’s make a room in the attic, and set up for him a bed, a table, and a lamp, so whenever he comes to us he will have a place to stay.”

3. Chumash Mesoras Harav, 2:247. See further Schachter, *Divrei ha-Rav*, 139–142.

holiness and God's presence into our own lives.⁴

MISHKAN OF THE HEART

The Rav's eminent forebear, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, stated that the well-known verse, "they shall make Me a Temple so that I might dwell (יִשְׁכְּנֵנִי) in their midst (בְּתוֹכָם)" (Exodus 25:8), indicates that the divine presence (שְׁכִינָה) is intended to be manifest within (בְּתוֹךְ) each Jew. The verse does not say He will dwell within the Temple but "in their midst," or, more literally, "within them." He continued:

The main purpose of the sacred and the Temple and the resting of the divine presence is man. For if he sanctifies himself properly by fulfilling all of the commandments... then he himself becomes the actual Temple, and within him is God. As it says, "The Temple (הַיְכָל) of God, the Temple of God, are these" (Jeremiah 7:4).⁵

This interpretation of the verse also features in the writings of the Malbim. In a lengthy treatment of the *Mishkan's* symbolism, he noted that the verse following "they shall make Me a Temple" ends with "and so shall you make" (Exodus 25:9). He explained:

He commanded "and so shall you make," that everyone should build a Temple in the chambers of their heart, preparing themselves to be a Temple for God and an abode for His mighty presence. [...] This should also be followed for generations to come: everyone should build a Temple in the chambers of their heart and prepare an altar to offer up all the parts of their soul to God, to the extent that they sacrifice their soul for His glory at

all times.⁶

Rabbi Elazar Azikri, the kabbalist best known for his liturgical poem "Yedid Nefesh," composed a poem that includes the line, "Inside my heart I will build a *Mishkan* for His splendor, my only soul shall offer Him a sacrifice." Based on this line, the famous rosh yeshiva of Chaim Berlin and original thinker Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner (1906–1980) composed the beautiful song known as *Bilvavi*. This song eloquently and figuratively expresses the Temple of divine service located within the heart:



Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner zt"l

בְּלִבִּי מִשְׁכַּן אֲבֵנָה, לַהֲדָר כְּבוֹדוֹ.
וּבְמִשְׁכַּן מְזֻבַּח אֲשֵׁים, לְקַרְנֵי הוֹדוֹ.
וְלִי תַמִּיד אֶקַּח לִי אֶת אֵשׁ הָעֵקֶדָה,
וּלְקַרְבָּן אֶקְרִיב לוֹ אֶת נַפְשִׁי הַיְחִידָה.

In my heart I will build a *mishkan*, for the beauty of His honor.

In the *mishkan* I will place an altar for the rays of His splendor.

For an eternal light, I will take for myself the fire of the *Akedah*,

And as a sacrifice I will offer Him my only soul. ■

6. Malbim on Exodus 25:8. See further his *Artzot ha-Shalom*, §3.



Rabbi Goldscheider's most recent OU Press Publication, "Torah United" on the weekly Parsha, can be ordered directly from Rabbi Goldscheider at arong@ouisrael.org at a special price for Torah Tidbits readers.

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4. Chumash Mesoras Harav, 2:225.
5. Nefesh ha-Chayim, pt. 1, ch. 4.