

When God sought to create the “earthly world,” he did so on the basis of the “heavenly world,” bending world with world . . . This was accomplished through three powers: wisdom, understanding, and knowledge [cf. Proverbs 3:19–20, where the three words are used in connection with God creating the world]. Through these same three powers was the Tabernacle erected [cf. Exod. 31:3, where God is said to inspire Bezalel, the Tabernacle’s craftsman, with “wisdom, understanding, and knowledge”] . . . Thus, all secrets concerning the creation of the universe are hidden in the commands concerning the erection of the Tabernacle.

While the exegetical goals of Rosenzweig and the Zohar are quite different, both pay close attention to the language of Scripture and to the intertextual references that the similarity engenders.

Thus, following the nexus established between *creation of universe* and *building of worship site*, one lesson to be learned from our *talmud Torah* is that our worship of God should be reflected in our relationship to the world which God created. Or, in the language of our talmudic sages, “We are God’s partners in creation.” Just as the heavenly, angelic choir is said to be eternally praising God, so, too, are we enjoined to worship God “evening, morning, and afternoon.” Just as God created the universe and charged the first human couple with its care and maintenance (cf. Gen. 1:28–29), so, too, are we, the descendants of that couple, charged with taking care of the world. And just as God created the universe with wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, as a reflection of God’s own divine, heavenly abode, so, too, are we, among whom, paradoxically, God dwells at all times, likewise commanded to sustain God’s universe with wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. Thus has God sought to remind us of this great responsibility in the opening words of this week’s Torah portion, “Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.”

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z”) and Harold Hassenfeld (z”). This commentary was first published in 5758.

Terumah 5779

תרומה תשע"ט



Why God Needs a Dwelling Place

Rabbi Robert Harris, Associate Professor of Bible and Ancient Semitic Languages, JTS

Recent portions of the Torah have dealt with the arrival of the Israelites at Mount Sinai; the great theophany of God, in which God spoke the Ten Words, or Decalogue; the revelation of the Book of the Covenant, containing the first extended legal section of the Torah; and the covenantal ceremony sealing the everlasting special relationship between God and the people of Israel (Exod. 19–24). Our portion this week turns to the subject of proper worship of God (a subject with which the Torah will be concerned formally for the next eight portions), and opens with a command from God that Moses organize the people to build God a sanctuary in the wilderness: “And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Speak to the Israelites that they may take for me a contribution; from everyone whose heart so moves him, take my contribution . . . and let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them’” (Exod. 25:1–2,8).

Many of our rabbis have sought to understand why God would have needed any kind of earthly “dwelling.” The 15th-century Spanish commentator Rabbi Isaac Abravanel raised some of these questions at the beginning of his commentary on the parashah:

Why did [God] command the erection of the tabernacle, when [God] said “that I may dwell among them,” as if God were an object demarcated and limited in space—which is the opposite of the truth!... After all, God himself spoke these words through the prophet Isaiah (66:1): “The heavens are my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what kind of house can you build for me?”

(Abravanel also cites a similar speech by King Solomon in 1 Kings 8:27.) In other words, what purpose could building a tabernacle or a temple possibly serve if God himself didn’t need one?

One answer, suggested by commentators both ancient and modern, is that the purpose of the Tabernacle is to be understood not in the context of God’s needs,

as it were, but in Israel's. Thus, the *Sefer Ha-hinukh*, a work which reflects Maimonides's attempt to count and explain the 613 commandments of the Torah, begins its explanation of the Tabernacle with the following exhortation:

Know, my child, that any commandment that God requires of humankind comes only out of God's desire to benefit us
God's command to build the Tabernacle, for us to offer therein our prayers and sacrifices, comes not out of God's needs to dwell in an earthly dwelling among humankind, but rather [out of God's awareness that we need] train our own selves

Malbim, a 19th-century European exegete, takes a moralistic approach. Rather than contemplating an actual, physical place of worship, he suggests that "each one of us needs to build God a Tabernacle in the recesses of our hearts, by preparing oneself to become a Sanctuary for God and a place for the dwelling of God's glory." He interprets God's promise to make a dynasty (*bayit*) for David (cf. 2 Sam. 7:11) to mean that God said that David himself should become a Temple (*bayit*) for God: "Thus it should be for all generations: each one should build a Tabernacle in the innermost recesses of the heart, and prepare an altar upon which to 'offer up,' as it were, all aspects of oneself to God's service."

In truth, however, philosophic or moralistic insights can take us only so far, when we interpret the Torah. As our rabbis have taught, "Scripture never loses its contextual meaning" (*ein mikra yotzeh midei peshuto*). What was the purpose of the Tabernacle within the context of the biblical narrative and ancient Israelite understandings of worship? Let us turn to the explanation offered by a more recent commentator, Moshe David (Umberto) Cassuto, late Professor of Bible at Hebrew University in Jerusalem:

In order to understand the significance and purpose of the Tabernacle, we must realize that the children of Israel, after they had been privileged to witness the Revelation of God on Mount Sinai, were about to journey from there and thus draw away from the site of the theophany. So long as they were encamped in the place, they were conscious of God's nearness; but once they set out on their journey, it seemed to them as though the link had been broken, unless there were in their midst a tangible symbol of God's presence among them. It was the function of the Tabernacle (literally, 'Dwelling') to serve as such a symbol. Not without reason, therefore, does this section come immediately after the section that describes

the making of the Covenant at Mount Sinai. The nexus between Israel and the Tabernacle is a perpetual extension of the bond that was forged at Sinai between the people and their God. The children of Israel, dwelling in tribal order at every encampment, are able to see, from every side, the Tabernacle standing in the midst of the camp, and the visible presence of the Sanctuary proves to them that just as the glory of the Lord dwelt on Mount Sinai, so He dwells in their midst wherever they wander in the wilderness. This is the purpose of Scripture (25:8), when it states: "And let them make Me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst."

Indeed, if the Tabernacle in the wilderness was meant to evoke the heavenly Temple where God "actually" resides, then how were the Israelites to regard themselves as they encamped around the Lord's presence (cf. Num. 2:2)? Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor, a 12th-century French commentator (and student of Rashi's grandsons) explains that, in their encampment around the Tabernacle, the Israelites were like the heavenly angels surrounding the "actual" presence of God in his Divine Throne of Glory. Thus, the Tabernacle, in the Israelite camp not only reminds the Israelites of God's continuing presence among them, but also teaches them their own role and responsibility vis-à-vis God: just as the heavenly angels "up above" praise and laud God, so too do we worship God down on earth "below."

This thought, the connection between the building of the Tabernacle and human responsibility towards God, leads us to our final consideration. Much recent biblical scholarship has pointed to the similarity in language and expression between the description of the Israelite erection of the Tabernacle in the final chapters of Exodus, and God's creation of the universe at the beginning of Genesis. In a letter written in 1926, Franz Rosenzweig, the German Jewish philosopher, educator, and translator, explained: "[Regarding] the powerful divine speech of chapters 25-31 . . . the entire meaning of [this] vision...looks toward the original model of the 'Dwelling' created on Sinai in the six days of cloudy darkness (24:16), to behold which Moses is called up into the clouds on the seventh day, and which is then completed by the people as a human replica of the divine act of creation (Exod. 39:32 and 40:33 reproduce Gen. 2:1 ff; Exod. 39:43 reproduces Gen. 1:31 and 2:3)." To a certain extent, Rosenzweig was anticipated by the Zohar, the medieval repository of Jewish mystical teachings. Making a connection between the actual erection of the Tabernacle in Exod. 38:21 and the creation of the universe in Gen. 1:1, the Zohar comments: