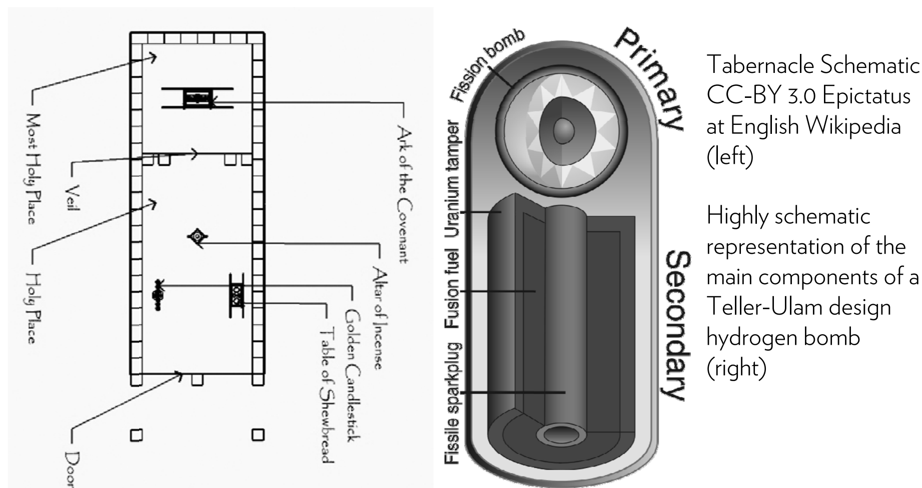
as a sea wake: Mike was a temple, tragically solomonic, invoking the powers that fire the sun."



Tabernacle Schematic CC-BY 3.0 Epictatus at English Wikipedia (left)

Highly schematic representation of the main components of a Teller-Ulam design hydrogen bomb (right)

Taking Rhodes metaphor further, we can see the structure of the Mishkan-sanctuary of the later chapters of Exodus echoed in the image of Mike, reproduced above: The lead lining stands in place of the courtyard curtains, the radiation channel and secondary fusion core in place of the courtyard itself, the fission spark plug in place of the bronze altar, and the fission core in place of the sanctum. Finally, the plutonium charge lies at the center of the sanctum powering it all, a replacement—*lehavdil*—for the Ark of the Covenant itself.

The architecture of progressive holiness, in which one approaches the source of tremendous mystery and power through stages, moving from foyer, to sanctuary, to raised altar, to the source of power hidden from view by a curtain is reflected in synagogue architecture today, just as it was in the Polish synagogues of Ulam's childhood and the Hungarian ones of Teller's. The image in which their design of massive power is shaped has been stripped of its traditional and ritual value. As Teller, said of his Jewish upbringing: "The idea of God that I absorbed was that it would be wonderful if He existed: We needed Him desperately but had not seen Him in many thousands of years." This is the problem of religion in modernity: How do we turn away from the bomb, and return to the sanctuary? How do we invoke the presence of God in a world in which so many feel the absence of the Divine so profoundly?

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שבת החודש
ויקהל–פקודי תשע"ז

Wonderment and Order: A Path to the Heart

Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor, JTS

The Baal Shem Tov posed a question about Parashat Pekudei that I too find most puzzling. Why are we told over and over again—10 times in the course of Exodus chapters 39–40, by my count, in addition to a declaration at the start of Parashat Vayhak-hel (35:4)—that the Israelites did all they did for the Tabernacle, gave what they gave, built what they built, "as the Lord had commanded Moses." Why not just tell us once, at the end of the account, that all they did was done in this way, for this purpose? The founder of Hasidism answered the question with a Kabbalistic teaching about the importance of fulfilling every mitzvah with the proper intention, an achievement for which all Jews should strive but that few can attain. I of course cannot comment on that esoteric teaching—but my understanding of the text proceeds along similar lines.

Two experiences decisively shaped my encounter with Vayak-hel–Pekudei this week. The first: I had a window seat last Sunday afternoon on a flight from New York to the Bay Area, and the sky was cloudless virtually all the way across the country. I stared and stared some more as frozen Midwest plains gave way to black-brown foothills, and then to snow-capped mountain peaks—all this as the sun went down and darkness descended. The scene was magnificent beyond any words I could find, so much so that I was not sure what I could do in the face of it except try to live in the wonder, praise the Creator, and be thankful that I am here to witness it, all the more from the vantage of 35,000 feet.

Something like this wonderment must have been part of the meaning that ancient Israelites found in their labor on the Tabernacle. They had stood at Sinai not long before, a moment of indescribable awe and no small terror. Soon after, they had tried to capture God in the molten form of a calf, acting out of fear that Moses, the sole conduit to the Master of their Fate, was not coming back from his latest meeting on the mountaintop. That mistake had almost resulted in their destruction.

Moses had assured them upon his return that if they followed God's commandments, including the blueprint for this tabernacle; if they poured devotion of the heart into the building project along with material gifts, and served God in other ways with similar devotion, God would continue to dwell among them during the journey through the wilderness. Perhaps the people were aware, as we are, that the language used to describe the construction of the Tabernacle echoes the description of God's creation of the world. They did not need technical terms such as microcosm and macrocosm to know that their lives had changed forever at the Red Sea, and changed once more at Sinai. God had in some sense "come down" to the top of a mountain that God had created, in order to meet Moses and give Israel the Torah.

Were I in the situation of those Israelites, I hope that I too would have responded as Parashat Vayak-hel describes, with such a generous outpouring of gifts and skills that Moses had to tell them to stop. "Let no man or woman make further effort toward gifts for the sanctuary!" (36:6). I might have rejoiced in the very *materiality* of the things they brought: the colors and textures of the fabrics; the shine of the metals; the gleam of the precious stones. There was comfort in the cutting of the boards, and the weaving and dying of the cloths. The measurements themselves were a source of joy and meaning in the wake of encounter with the Infinite: two of this, twelve of that, this many cubits high by that many wide, "the copper from the elevation offering [coming] to 70 talents and 2,400 shekels." YHWH their God, they now knew for sure from close encounter, could not be imaged, could not be seen or touched, is forever ethereal and beyond definition—as endless as those mountains seemed to me as I flew over them and stared as far as my eyes could see. And yet, having built the Tabernacle, they are promised that God would dwell "in them" or "among them."

The second experience that shaped my reading of Vayak-hel-Pekudei this year is the reading of Michael Lewis's book, *The Undoing Project*, a gripping account of the research and friendship of two great Israeli psychologists, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. I overlapped with Tversky at Stanford for a while, and we have mutual friends; I have seen Kahneman in action at a conference or two. The impact of the book for me lay in its lucid presentation of the pair's research, which demonstrated that much human thought—or at least thought by highly educated individuals in the modern West—is less clear-headed than we like to think. All sorts of biases, self-deceptions, longings, and fears get in the way of seeing what is in front of us. We filter out noise that we do not want to hear—and other things too; we calculate risk differently, depending on whether it is framed as possible gain or possible loss; we exhibit a strong preference for the known, the status quo, over the unknown, the strange. "A part of good science," Tversky stated, "is to see what everyone else can see but think what no one else has ever said."

I believe that the Torah sees itself as an attempt by God to get humanity to see, think and act differently than we have ever done before—and that is one major reason why God commands the building of the Tabernacle. What led to the golden calf except a witches' brew of Israelite anxiety, longing, and desire? What provoked the people to worry about finding adequate drinking water so soon after God had split the Sea for them? Why did the Children of Israel doubt God and Moses on countless occasions?

The Israelites, in this view, wanted desperately to keep the overwhelming experience of God's presence close at hand—but in a way that did not threaten their own precarious survival. They had looked into the terrifying abyss of their own propensity for self-destruction, and needed a way to contain that as well. The painstaking detail of the blueprint for the Tabernacle was required for the task, no less than the space left by God for their own free-will offerings, skills, and creativity. Use this kind of stone, on that kind of setting; measure this many cubits by that many; direct energy in this way, contain fear in that; express and channel love in acts that come more easily and routinely than purity of heart or words of sincere devotion.

Artistry and craftsmanship continue to serve us in this fashion. Sacred times and spaces lift us up, eliciting heights and depths of generosity and creativity that we had not known were there. What does it mean that Israel did everything as God had instructed Moses, asked the 16th-century commentator Seforno (on Exod. 39:5)? "In every act which the artists performed, their intention was to fulfill the will of God, may He be blessed, who commanded this to Moses." As always, God wants the heart—and that is what we need to give.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

The Sanctuary and the Bomb

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The US gave the codename "Ivy Mike" to its first full-scale experimental thermonuclear device. Designed by of two the century's most significant nuclear scientists: Stanisław Ulam and Edward Teller, Mike's design was a strangely beautiful one. As historian Richard Rhodes wrote in *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb*: "Steel, lead, waxy polyethylene, purple-black uranium, gold leaf, copper, stainless steel, plutonium, a breath of tritium, silvery deuterium effervescent