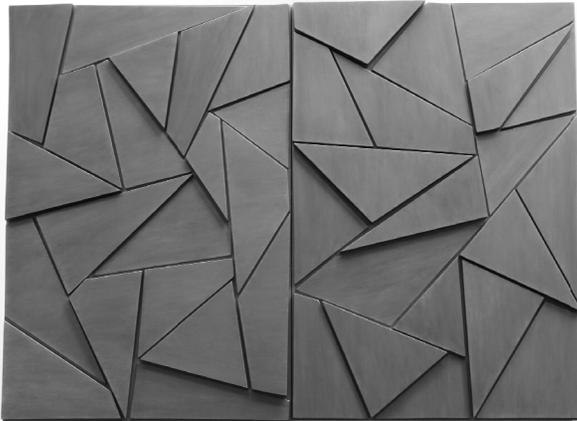


דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Including the Broken

Tobi Kahn, Artist-in-Residence, JTS



Arks in contemporary sanctuaries are spiritual descendants of the Ark whose construction and purpose is described in this week's parashah. The ark above was created for Congregation Ohr Shalom–The Summit Jewish Community Center, in Summit, New Jersey. The congregation's rabbi, Avi Friedman, writes:

If one looks straight on at the beautiful *aron kodesh* designed and created for us by Tobi Kahn, one sees two solid, beautiful doors—just like the two Tablets of the Covenant. Take a step to the side, though, and look from an angle and you will see a hint of the Sacred Fragments [the original tablets that were shattered in Exod. 32:19], which were stored in the original Ark together with the second, complete set of Tablets created by Moshe. The inclusion of the Sacred Fragments in Tobi's design is a constant reminder to us of how the Torah expects us to treat our fellow human beings. At the end of the day, none of us is a perfect tablet—we all have chips, nicks, scratches and cracks. And yet, we all deserve a place in our sacred community.

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TORAH FROM JTS



Parashat Terumah 5776

פרשת תרומה תשע"ו



When Humanity Creates with God

Dr. Vivian Mann, Director of the Master's Program in Jewish Art and Visual Culture, JTS

Parashat Terumah records God's commission to Moses to build the Tabernacle as the spiritual center of the Jewish people, the place where God would dwell among them (Exod. 25:8). Set in the center of the Israelite camp, viewed from the surrounding tents, the Tabernacle was intended to be a physically imposing structure. Its specified height and size gave it a grandeur lacking elsewhere in the camp, and the sumptuous materials of which it was composed were outward signs of its special nature. Height and materials differentiated the Tabernacle from all the other covered spaces surrounding it, emphasized its distinctiveness, and contributed to defining it as a holy space. The concept of a holy space had appeared earlier in the Bible—for example, as Moses approached the burning bush (Exod. 3:5); now it was to be applied to a manmade structure that would allow God to dwell in the midst of His people.

At first reading, God's commission to Moses may seem too detailed to allow for any architectural or artistic innovation on the part of its earthly builders. All the materials to be used in building the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) and creating its furnishings—the Ark of the Covenant, table of the shewbread, menorah, and altars—are specified, as are the dimensions of each constituent part. Ten curtains would form the sides, each 28 cubits long and 4 cubits wide. They were to be made of blue, purple, and scarlet linen and woven with representations of cherubim. Despite the specificity of these requirements, we are left with questions: What did the cherubim look like? How big were they relative to the size of the curtains? Where were they placed to form a pleasing composition? To satisfy our hunger for answers to these questions, scholars look at contemporaneous Egyptian

and Syrian art and try to suggest models for the art of the Israelite Tabernacle. Yet the art's actual appearance is unknown.

To take another example, the Ark of the Covenant was made of acacia wood and was 2½ cubits long and 1½ cubits wide (Exod. 25:10). This wooden form was then overlaid with gold within and without, and a gold “crown,” presumably some sort of ornament that projected from the outer gold layer, was added (25:11). But how was the surface of the gold covering worked? Was it smooth, or did it have a pattern? What did the crowning ornament look like? And who decided on its appearance—God or the human being who carried out God's will? Rashi comments that this crown is a harbinger of later Torah crowns. But the connecting of two very different forms with different purposes is not helpful in visualizing the original crown of the Ark. As with these examples, so too with the other furnishings of the Tabernacle: all of the divine directives still leave room for creativity on the part of the artists who made them.

The same is true of the laws governing the making of ceremonial objects discussed later in various codes of Jewish law. The form and materials of only three objects are completely specified in halakhah (the Torah scroll, the tefillin, and the scroll of the mezuzah). All the remaining ceremonial objects have partial requirements or none at all, with the result that Judaica has been made in a great variety of forms and styles that reflect the artistic cultures of the countries in which Jews have lived. The lack of specificity in Jewish law regarding most ceremonial objects allowed for artists to be creative in the same way that the makers of the Mishkan were able to exercise artistic freedom in the composition of the Tabernacle curtains and in the surface texture and crown of the Ark.

The commands relative to building the *Mishkan* and its furnishings were transmitted to Moses, but he was not the one who carried them out. Moses, the great and brilliant leader of the Jewish people, was incapable of realizing, in three dimensions, the vision of the menorah that God had shown him on Sinai (BT Menahot 29a). Rashi remarks about Exodus 25:31, “Moses was perplexed.” As a result, “God called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur of the tribe of Judah, who was filled with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding and in knowledge of all

manner of workmanship.” (Exod. 31:2-3). The naming of Bezalel and the words used to describe him are an acknowledgment that artistry—the ability to conceptualize visually and then to create that which is envisioned—is a talent given only to some. Only Bezalel, the man of artistic vision, was capable of carrying out God's commands.

The recognition of the holy as distinct from the profane is the mark of a religious outlook. A recognition of sacred time and sacred places distinguishes those who acknowledge a spiritual dimension in their lives. For a people who had just received their religious constitution, the Tabernacle designed by God and executed by man was a joint effort based on two different artistic senses, that of God, the architect and designer, and that of man, who added the details. This “partnership” became a concrete symbol of the Jewish people's commitment to God, and of God's willingness to dwell among them. At the same time, the partnership evident in the building of the Tabernacle may be seen as a paradigm of the ongoing relationship between God and Israel. God is the lawgiver; the people “embroider” on His words—or interpret them.

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