

Making Space for God's Presence

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At the outset of the pandemic, the hospital in which I served as a chaplain put all of the Covid+ patients in one Intensive Care Unit, which became known as “the unit.” But as days turned to months this Covid+ unit became “the first” Covid unit, and when the entire hospital was filled with Covid+ patients, there was no longer a need for the name. During those dark days, I often referred to the hospital as my congregation; in it we all sought God’s presence in a new way, since these were times of uncertainty and terror.

Two years later, when most of the Covid patients were being managed on medical floors, the ICUs could once again be used for regular intensive care patients. The close-knit staff on “the unit” were having trouble with this transition, and they called me. They needed help to turn “the unit” back into their ICU. “The unit” was where people went who could not be helped. The ICU was a place of sophisticated technologies and medical miracles. They had witnessed so much loss and trauma in this space, they could not imagine the ICU treating patients who were going to heal and go home.

“It’s not that we believe in ghosts, rabbi, but we literally see the ones we lost—so many of them. Their faces are everywhere”.

When my staff and I entered the unit, we were astonished. It really didn’t look like “the unit” anymore. The walls had been spackled and painted, the floors had been waxed, the windows cleaned. But the staff could still see the faces of the patients they had lost. I could see them too. We all could. The goal of our visit was to rededicate “the unit,” restoring it to a place of physical healing and a sanctuary for God’s presence.

We began to sing:

“Oh Lord Prepare me, to be a sanctuary, Pure and holy,
tried and true

With thanksgiving, I’ll be a living Sanctuary for You.”

Our rededication of the hospital’s ICU echoed for me the original Jewish sacred space described in the Book of Exodus. The double Torah reading for Vayak-hel and Pekudei provides God’s blueprint for a traveling sacred space that the Israelites would build during their journey through the wilderness. As they travelled, they would carry a place for the presence of God and for revelatory encounters between God and the high priests on behalf of the people. It would be a space for doing sacred work and for being with God.

The Torah embeds its design plan with a series of doubles—names, spaces, and imagery. First, this double Torah reading provides two different parts of the construction that appear to be referred to by different names: the tabernacle (*Mishkan*) referring to the central space, and the tent (*ohel*) referring to the covering spread over it and enlarging its area.

In Exodus 40:19 we read:

וַיִּפְרֹשׂ אֶת-הָאֹהֶל, עַל-הַמִּשְׁכָּן, וַיִּשֶׂם אֶת-מִכְסֵה הָאֹהֶל עָלָיו,
מִלְמַעְלָה--כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה', אֶת-מֹשֶׁה

*And he spread the tent (ohel) over the tabernacle (mishkan),
and put the covering of the tent above upon it; as God
commanded Moses.*

The instructions for building the Mishkan contain distinct parallels to the creation of the world, resulting in a kind of doubling. In both the creation of the world and the creation of the Mishkan, work ceases on Shabbat (Gen. 2:1–3; Exod. 35:1–2). In the descriptions of the creation of both the world and the Mishkan, the work is judged to have been appropriately done (Gen. 1:31; Exod. 39:43), after which the same Hebrew verb *וַיִּכְלֶם* is used to describe the completion of both the Mishkan and the world (Gen. 2:1; Exod. 40:33). Just as God had built a space for humanity, humans were to build a space for God.

The Torah devotes 31 verses to the creation of the world, and between 300–400 to the Sanctuary. Why does this project with two names and two parts and doubled imagery receive so much attention? And if it is so important, why would it have dual purposes?

A verse earlier in Exodus gives us a hint:

In Parshat Terumah (Exodus 25–27), the first of the four construction parshiyot, verse 8 explains very simply to the Israelites why they will build this “Mishkan”:

וַעֲשׂוּ לִי, מִקְדָּשׁ; וְשָׁכַנְתִּי, בְּתוֹכְכֶם.

And let them make Me a Sanctuary that I may dwell among them.

From this verse we learn that God understands the people need tangible evidence of the indwelling of the Divine Presence—a place for God to be. The following midrash from *Shemot Rabbah* responds with great relational sensitivity to the idea that God will “live” among the people. It explains that the Sanctuary was created for two purposes: a place for God to be and a place for encounters with God to be enacted.

The midrash tells of a person who gives his only daughter in marriage to a suitor from another place. The person says to their daughter, “I cannot ask you *not* to move away, but it makes me so sad to know you will be far from me. Please, wherever you live, build an extra room for me, so that I can come to visit you.” The Israelites are like the daughter, creating a space in their home for God even when God

feels distant, and a place for encounters with God when God does visit.

This parable explains that the people needed two things from this relationship; to be assured of God’s presence among them during their journey, as well as a place for special moments that elevate their worship. The people can experience God as a powerful encounter that comes from the formal worship of the high priests, or as a constant presence of protection and comfort. And so the project needs to be both; the Mishkan—a place for God’s presence as well as an *ohel moed*—a sacred space for Divine encounters.

After our voices quieted, I talked about how “the unit” had been a sanctuary. It once held unforgettable sacred encounters. I had counseled many times there that surely God too, was deeply saddened by the fragility of human life they’d witnessed. It was also, I stretched, a place of God’s comforting presence, joining them through the work of their tender hands and hearts. Now, through this time together, it would be a tabernacle with two distinct, sacred purposes: an *ohel moed*, a tent of meeting, for coming together to encounter God in doing the sacred work of healing, and a Mishkan, a space for God’s presence to dwell among them.

Quiet tears on smiling faces showed that we had in fact rededicated this Mishkan. This ritual of naming the awful experiences of the past foreshadowed the way the medical staff could envision themselves as God’s partners moving forward and working together to heal the sick.