

God's Longing to Dwell Among Us

After the revelation at Sinai, the Book of Exodus turns its attention to the spiritual welfare of the Israelites during their desert trek to the promised land. This requires elaborate plans for the building of a mobile sanctuary, known in English as the 'tabernacle.' Looking closely at Exodus 25:1-9, verse 8 stands out:

"And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8).

Abravanel, a Spanish-Jewish Torah commentator of the 15th century, poses a question that has resonated through centuries of Jewish Torah study:

"Why did the Almighty command us regarding the construction of the tabernacle saying, 'I shall dwell among them,' as if He were a circumscribed corporeal being limited in space when this is the opposite of the truth?"

How would you answer? Why would God, who cannot be contained by time and space, request a holy dwelling place with specific measurements and fixtures?

Abravanel replies by saying that the last thing that God wanted was for the people to think that they had been forsaken, that God's throne was in heaven and remote from humankind. To combat this erroneous belief *"He commanded them to make a Tabernacle, as if to imply that he dwelt in their midst, that they should believe that God lived in their midst and His Providence was forever with them."*

Thus the divine purpose for the tabernacle is "to implant in their souls that God walked in the midst of their camp." To accentuate this divine desire to be close to God's people, Abravanel quotes from the love poetry of the Song of Songs:

"There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the window, peering through the lattice" (2:9).

But perhaps you already gleaned this insight from your own careful reading of 25:8. Did you ponder the words *"that I may dwell among them"?*

The tabernacle is not designed to 'contain' God, but to reassure the people of God's closeness in their earthly lives.

Knowledge of the Hebrew text can enrich our reflection. The verb 'to dwell' used in 25:8 [from whose root also comes the Hebrew word *mishkan*, 'tabernacle'] conveys the idea of a temporary lodging, a tent characteristic of a nomadic lifestyle. Thus the sanctuary or tabernacle is not at all like the fixed stone temples 'housing' pagan gods. Rather, it is a dwelling that is accessible and flexible enough to move with the camp of the Israelites on their wilderness journey. It is not literally God's abode; rather, it gives the Israelites a tangible reference point as they seek to orient their minds and hearts to the divine presence.

In the Midrash (Jewish storytelling traditions) we read:

God said to Israel, "Make me a dwelling (Exodus 25:8; 26:1), for I desire to dwell amid my children." When the ministering angels heard this, they said to God, "Why will you abandon the creatures above, and descend to those below? It is your glory that you should be in heaven." But God said, "See how greatly I love the creatures below that I shall descend and dwell beneath the goats' hair." Hence it says: "Make curtains of goats' hair for the Tabernacle" (Exod. 26:7). [Tanh.B., Terumah, 47b]

As you enter into your Torah reflection, notice how it enriches your Christian faith and enhances an appreciation of the Christian use of the term 'tabernacle'. •

Sources: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996); Montefiore & Loewe, eds., *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York, 1974); Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary* (Jerusalem/New York, 1991). Scripture: NJPS.

© Teresa Pirola, 2012. lightoftorah.net
Reproduction for non-commercial use permitted with acknowledgement of the Light of Torah website.