

The Tabernacle

*'And the Word became flesh and lived among us'
(John 1:14, NRSV).*

Lived among us. New Testament scholars consider this phrase to contain an allusion to the Tabernacle built by the Israelites in the wilderness which we read in the book of Exodus. By 'Tabernacle' the reference is to the portable tent-like shrine that travels with the people on their wilderness journey. The biblical terms we encounter are:

(Mishkan) Tabernacle

(Mikdash) Sanctuary

(Ohel) Tent, also called: 'Tent of Appointment'; 'Tent of Meeting'; 'Tent of Witness'.

This is the place where Moses goes to commune with God and bring instruction to the people. Most importantly, it signifies *God dwelling in the midst of his people*, the children of Israel.

Perhaps many church-goers don't spend much time thinking about this Tabernacle in the wilderness. So, let's give it our attention now, with the help of Jewish insights. Turning to Chapters 25-29 of Exodus we find a substantial account of the building of the Tabernacle and its furnishings, plus a description of ritual details. Admittedly, it can be challenging reading! But then we reach a passage which puts the whole elaborate project into wonderful perspective:

"I will meet with the Israelites there [at the entrance of the tent of meeting], and it shall be sanctified by my glory... I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them; I am the Lord their God." (Exodus 29:43, 45-46)

In the longer passage from which these words come (29:42-46) notice the repetition of 'meet,' 'consecrate,' dwell,' 'I am the Lord.' By 'meeting' with the Children of Israel at the Tent, by dwelling in their midst, the glory of the Lord floods everything. It makes the people holy.

The Tabernacle has been much discussed by generations of Jewish sages. One powerful idea we find in Jewish storytelling traditions (midrash) is that even before the creation of the world God was longing and intending to come down from his heavenly abode to dwell among his people. Sometimes human sin is seen as delaying that coming. But the point is, the Tabernacle represents a critical moment in the divine-human relationship. Although the Tabernacle is a finite structure built by human hands, through Jewish eyes we see that it refers to something that defies containment: God's love for his people. All the details of construction ultimately refer to intimacy, the desire and commitment of God and Israel to be close to one another.

A question that has fascinated the sages is: *If God is infinite, how can the Torah point to the Tabernacle as God's dwelling place?* In Jewish mystical tradition this is explained through the concept *Tsimtsum*, a Hebrew term referring to divine 'contraction'. The All-Powerful God, who cannot be contained, willingly withdraws the intensity of divine presence into himself. God does this out of love, to make 'space' for creation, and so that he can dwell with the people in their humble earthly setting. In this process of divine 'contraction'—God choosing to be 'smaller' (in a manner of speaking) so as to be more immediately present to his creation—the Tabernacle becomes a focal point.

Another rich idea resonates in the writings of Jewish commentators such as Malbim (19th century Eastern Europe): the most precious dwelling place for the divine presence is the human person. The most vital place for the sanctuary to be built is in human hearts and lives. There, each of us must build an altar, lift up our souls and sacrifice our desires for God.

Continue to ponder the wilderness Tabernacle, allowing these Jewish insights to enrich your own grasp of the words of John's Gospel: *"The word became flesh, and lived among us."* •



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Notes:

1. *The Five Books of Moses*, 420.
2. Malbim: (1809-1880), Russian-Jewish Torah commentator.

Bibliography: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York, 1995); Heschel, *Heavenly Torah* (New York/London, 2007); Levine and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (New York, 2011); Montefiore & Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York, 1974); Scripture: NRSV

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