



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vayakhel 5768

By Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels

March 1, 2008

Our *parshah*, *Vayakhel*, describes not only Moshe's call for donations to the construction of the Tabernacle, the *mishkan*, but also the community's generous response. What is the role of the *mishkan* in the lives of the Israelites that caused them to respond so generously?

The *mishkan*, literally "dwelling-place," is the place where God and Israel meet.¹ It is here that God's divine presence, the *Shechinah* (from the same root as *mishkan*), dwells in the midst of Israel. It is the means by which God becomes present in the very center of the Israelite community and in the hearts of the Israelites. God instructs, "let them make me a *mishkan* and I will dwell (*shakhanti*) within them (*betokham*)."² The Sefat Emet, a Polish Chassidic master, reads this as "within them truly" (*betokham mamash*). That is, God will dwell within the very essence of each Israelite.

Prior to the *mishkan*, the Israelites' relationship with the divine was with the transcendent, miraculous God of the splitting of the Red Sea and the revelation at Sinai. At Sinai, the people trembled in fear at the awesome revelation of the divine and retreated from a direct personal encounter.³ It is only through the *mishkan*, the earthly dwelling-place of God, that a more intimate encounter becomes possible. Indeed, the *mishkan* is not just any meeting place, but, as both the *midrash* and Kabbalistic literature make clear, a place of great intimacy, the bridal chamber of God and Israel where the truest level of intimacy can manifest after the marriage at Mt. Sinai.⁴

The intimate erotic nature of the *mishkan* can be seen in the beautiful fabrics and the fine metals which are the adornments of the *Shechinah*, the divine bride, and the hangings of Her wedding chamber.⁵ Similarly, the cherubim in the *mishkan*, who face each other with outspread wings, are, we are told in the Talmud, in fact intertwined in an erotic embrace,⁶ and erotic significance is given to other verses and gifts.⁷ Finally, following the *midrash*, we can see the similarity between the word for "completing" (*vayakhel* or *kalot*) the *mishkan*⁸ and the word for "bride" (*kalah*), an indication that the completion of the *mishkan* was also the consummation of this divine-human marriage.⁹

In the process of constructing the *mishkan*, then, God is transformed from the awesome divine Other, unapproachable and incomprehensible, to the intimate divine Beloved, present in the midst of Israel. It is the act of generosity, the very process of giving, that actualizes the opening of the heart that in turn makes intimacy possible.

¹ Called, as it is, the Tent of Meeting, Shmot 35:21, 38:8

² Shmot 25:8

³ Shmot 19:16, 20:15-18

⁴ See the opening *drashot* of Pesikta de-Rav Kahana and Zohar II 179b, I 239a

⁵ Shmot 35:5-8; see Zohar II 235a

⁶ Shmot 37:9, Yoma 54a

⁷ For instance, we find hidden erotic significance in the peculiar verse which reads literally, "and the men came on the women, all the generous of heart...." (Shmot 35:22). Similarly, the donations of the women's mirrors are accepted because of their erotic significance (Shmot 38:8 and Rashi there).

⁸ Bereshit 2:2, Shmot 40:33, Bamidbar 7:1, I Melachim 7:40

⁹ See the opening *drashot* of Pesikta de-Rav Kahana. The partitions and curtains of the *mishkan* can be seen kabbalistically as the garments of God who is undressed by the mystic, represented by Moshe as he enters the *mishkan*, who then joins the divine in erotic embrace. See this idea of the garments of God in R. Joseph Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, Mosad Bialik, pp. 195-6, 214-5.

Again and again in the *parshah* we are told of the generous of heart and noble of spirit who contributed to the *mishkan*.¹⁰ This is a generosity not only of possessions, but one that reaches even deeper, as we are told, “take from yourselves an offering to God, all the generous of heart.”¹¹ That is, a literal taking from yourselves, your experience, your wisdom and particularity, and offering it to the Beloved. Before, alienated by God’s distance at the peak of Mount Sinai, the people could only express their generosity to the illusion of divinity in the Golden Calf.¹² Now, inviting God into their midst, the natural generosity of intimacy is properly expressed.

Just as God is ultimately both foreign and intimate, both self and other, so this is true of our fellow human beings. We can experience our fellow humans as alienated, even antagonistic, others, or as intimate beloved companions. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, alienated by God’s otherness, it is often easy to feel disconnected and not responsible for those who are most other, most unlike us. This disconnection is apparent between us and our neighbors in the developing world, who are separated from us by distance, wealth, culture and politics. The challenge and promise of the *mishkan* is that we can bridge those gaps and give our fellow humans, reflections of the divine image, a place to dwell in our hearts, minds and souls and literally ‘*ve-shakhanti betokham*’—the I, the personhood of every individual, will dwell within us.

It is this almost mystical moment of connection, the enactment of the *mishkan* in our own lives, that should be the foundation for our ethical responsibility and action. Through realizing our essential intimacy with all humans, our natural generosity flows forth, allowing us to give both from our possessions and from our very selves, from the depths of our being and from the skills and experiences that we have to contribute. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we too can offer our sacrifices, our money and our generosity to enable the other to dwell within us and to give the other, like the divine, a secure dwelling-place on earth. Once we had the Tabernacle (*mishkan*) and the Temple (*mikdash*). Now we have only our hearts—hearts that can be a dwelling place for all those who are suffering, if we open them wide enough. We can build the *mishkan* of our hearts, making space for every human to dwell there, and so become filled with the generosity that comes from transforming the other into the beloved.



Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels earned a Master’s Degree in Modern Jewish Studies in England at the University of Oxford. He then went on to four years of *yeshiva* study in Israel culminating in rabbinic ordination from R. Daniel Landes at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Jewish Studies specializing in Kabbalah and Hasidism at the University of Chicago, and teaching in a variety of settings in the U.S. and Israel on Judaism and Jewish mysticism. He hopes to integrate his study and practice and to help teach and live Judaism as a spiritual discipline. James can be reached at moshe@uchicago.edu.

¹⁰ See, for example, Shmot 35:21

¹¹ Shmot 35:5

¹² Shmot 32:3

©2008 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/parshah.

The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the inaugural recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation and as a mother, wife, colleague and friend, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to social justice and the Jewish community. She died tragically at the age of 54. Lisa was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author. The AJWS Torah Commentary series is made possible in part by funds granted by the Charles H. Revson Foundation.