



## THE PARSHA EXPERIMENT

### PARSHAT TERUMAH:

# IS GOD TALKING TO ME THROUGH THE LAWS OF THE MISHKAN?

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#### SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE

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- I. Last week's parsha, Parshat Mishpatim, ended with God calling Moses up to Mt. Sinai to get the Tablets.
  - a. Moses goes up, and the very last verse of Parshat Mishpatim says: Moses was on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights (Exodus 24:18)
  - b. We all know what happens next - Towards the end of the 40 days, the Israelites get antsy that Moses isn't coming back
    - i. They make a Golden Calf to replace him.
    - ii. Moses comes down from the mountain, sees the Golden Calf, and smashes the tablets that he just received from God.
  - c. The story of the Golden Calf is not the next thing the Torah tells us - First, we get 7 chapters of detailed instructions for building a Mishkan, a Tabernacle.
  - d. Why is this happening here?
    - i. It totally interrupts the story!
    - ii. And the question is particularly strong this week, and here's why: The Mishkan isn't even going to be built now. The perfect place for these instructions would be right before it's actually built, after the sin of the Golden Calf.
    - iii. And yet, they're here - well before its construction. Why?
- II. Bring up our 20-second parsha recap.
  - a. God says, Israel should bring donations to build Tabernacle - so God can "dwell" there
  - b. Then, Moses gets details for its construction.
    - i. First, he gets instructions about how to build the ark, table, and menorah
    - ii. Then come details about the structure of the Tabernacle itself, followed by instructions for the altar and the outer courtyard
- III. Why are these instructions here, in the middle of the Sinai narrative?
  - a. The first step may be to figure out what exactly is going on at this point in the story.
    - i. Moses is atop Mt. Sinai, and right before he comes down, he gets the tablets.
    - ii. But that can't be the whole story -- he's up there for 40 days
    - iii. What was he doing up there for the 960 hours before God gave him the tablets?
  - b. When God calls Moses up at the end of Parshat Mishpatim, God says: "Ascend to me on this mountain and be there...And I'll give you the tablets, and the Torah and laws that I have written in order to teach them." (Exodus 24:12)

- i. Because God tells Moses what will happen on Mt. Sinai before it happens, we assume that we don't actually know what happens while he's on the mountain.
      - ii. The camera shuts off, the text breaks from the story, gives us these laws, and when the camera is back, we see Moses coming down with the Tablets.
    - c. But what if that wasn't true?
      - i. What if the camera doesn't actually turn off -- what if it followed Moses up the mountain and we actually see his interactions with God on Sinai?
      - ii. And these details, about how to build the Mishkan, are actually what God teaches Moses while he's up there.
      - iii. Many commentators - like the Ramban, Nachmanides - actually say this
    - d. That makes this whole situation even stranger.
      - i. This is a really special moment for Moses.
      - ii. Moses doesn't need to be on Sinai for God to speak to him --- God gives Moses instructions all the time.
      - iii. Sinai is about something else.
        - 1. Moses is actually in God's presence.
        - 2. God is about to give Moses the tablets - it's a point of contact between humankind and the Divine.
      - iv. So why not let Moses appreciate the moment now, and give the instructions later, when they're ready to start building?
        - 1. Why does this spiritual experience have to include these detailed, arduous instructions?
        - 2. It's hard to even begin to answer this question without really understanding what the Mishkan is in the first place.
        - 3. Why do we build one? And why do we even need one?
- IV. Take a look at a few details from the construction of the Mishkan from this parsha, Parshat Terumah, and from the next few parshiot, and see if you can spot a pattern.
- a. It just might be in that pattern that we'll begin to understand the essence of the Mishkan.
  - b. Let's start at the beginning - If you were giving the instructions for building the Mishkan, what would you open with?
    - i. Probably start with the structure of the Mishkan itself
    - ii. That makes sense - you build the house before planning the furniture.
    - iii. And later, in Parshat Vayakhel, it's actually built that way
  - c. But when God first gives the instructions here, in Parshat Terumah, that's not the order God chooses.
    - i. Even before the Mishkan itself, God tells Moses how to build the Ark, which will hold the Tablets!
    - ii. That's very strange; why build a cabinet before you've built the room itself?
  - d. Later, when Moses is told where to position one of the vessels, the Golden Altar, God says that it should be positioned in front of the curtain which is on the Ark, which is before the Ark's cover, which is on top of the tablets themselves. (Exodus 30:6)
    - i. There's a much easier way to say that: "Place it in front of the curtain." That's it!
    - ii. But instead, it says: in front of the curtain, which is over the ark, and in front of the Ark's cover, which is over the tablets.

- iii. The text seems very intent to highlight that the altar doesn't have its own position - it's just in relation to the tablets in the Ark.
  
- V. And here's one more interesting thing. Look at the names of Mishkan itself.
  - a. It's often referred to as the "Ohel Moed, the Tent of Meeting."
    - i. It's where God meets Moses and the Kohanim.
    - ii. But, it's not just anywhere in the Mishkan that God meets them. I, God, will speak to you from atop the Ark's cover, from between the two cherubs, which rests on the Ark of testimony (Exodus 25:22)
    - iii. And it's repeated later: Before the Ark's cover which rests on the tablets --- which is where I will meet you. (Exodus 29:42)
      - 1. Look at what's happening: By calling the Mishkan an "Ohel Moed" - a Tent of Meeting - the Torah actually defines the entire Mishkan by the function of one thing:
      - 2. The tablets inside the Ark.
    - iv. And we find something similar later.
      - 1. Throughout the Torah, the tablets are called: לַחַת הַעֵדוּת - tablets of testimony.
      - 2. Most simply, the tablets are testimony of the Revelation at Sinai.
      - 3. God met us, and He gave us these laws!
  - b. But, amazingly, later (in Parshat Pekudei) the Mishkan itself is called: Mishkan Ha'edut.
    - i. There's no testimony in the Mishkan itself - it's the tablets, inside the Mishkan
    - ii. But again, the Mishkan is identified by the function of the Tablets. Why?
  - c. So with all this in mind, let's take a step back. What picture does all of this paint together?
    - i. The ark is the very first instruction, despite that it wasn't built first.
    - ii. The vessels are positioned only vis-a-vis the tablets.
    - iii. The Mishkan itself is defined by the function of the tablets.
  
- VI. It seems that the entire purpose of the Mishkan is the Tablets.
  - a. The Ark is the very first instruction, to symbolically show its primacy.
  - b. The Tablets, which were placed inside the ark, are the essence of the whole enterprise.
    - i. The other vessels are positioned vis-a-vis the Tablets, because that's the "center" around which everything else is built.
    - ii. And the names of the Mishkan reflect the Tablets for that same reason: the essence of the entire Mishkan is the tablets.
  - c. The tablets aren't just a record of laws. They're a constitution.
    - i. And the constitution is much more than just the particular rules contained in them.
    - ii. It's a symbolic representation of the most fundamental values upon which a nation is founded.
    - iii. And it's housed in a central place so that it'll serve as constant reminder of who they are and what they believe.
  - d. Take the US Constitution
    - i. It's stored in the nation's capital, protected by thick glass and titanium.

- ii. It's guarded day and night.
- iii. It's equipped with a vault designed to sustain a nuclear blast.
- iv. Why do we do that?
- v. Because the constitution is our nation's identity. It gives us purpose. It's what we stand for.

VII. The tablets are Israel's Constitution.

- a. They contain the principles that God singled out as the most important values by which this new nation should live.
- b. And The Mishkan is the way in which we house and protect these principles.
  - i. The tablets are placed in a golden box, in a wooden box, in another golden box, covered with 2 cherubs - who guard it day and night.
  - ii. And that's housed within a much larger structure - the Mishkan.
- c. As we learned in the book Numbers, the Mishkan rested in the center of the Israelite camp -- everyone settled around it.
  - i. That moral constitution is placed at the heart of the nation, symbolically, to serve as a constant reminder to Israel of who they are and what they represent.
  - ii. God meets with and speaks to us from atop those very tablets - from the heart of our national foundation.
  - iii. Only when we can embody these principles in the Tablets and make them the core of our nation, can God live among us.

VIII. Now let's return to our question. Why does Moses get these instruction while he's at Sinai?

- a. Moses goes up to get the Tablets, and when he does, God says: Moses --- those aren't just pieces of stone.
- b. That's your constitution. And here's how to ensure that it'll always be preserved, that they'll always be the center around which everything else revolves.
- c. Here's the Mishkan. And it's a perfect continuation of the last two parshiyot:
  - i. In Yitro, we get the Ten Commandments, and in Mishpatim, we learn all laws that show that they're not just 10 commandments, but they're core moral values.
  - ii. And now, in Parshat Terumah, we have a home for these principles - a way to make them the bedrock of Israel's society.
  - iii. They teach us how to be kind to the orphan and widow, how to be respectful of our fellow man, how to affirm our relationship with our Creator.
- d. But is that all that the Mishkan is?
  - i. Even if the whole structure revolves around the tablets, it has many other elements too!
  - ii. Throughout the rest of the book of Exodus, we see a bunch mysterious things about the Mishkan -- it has many different sections that grant access only to certain people; there's Godly Clouds that descends on it; pillars of fire by night.
  - iii. So, while the Mishkan is a structure that houses our constitution, there's much more to it than that.