



Mishkan, Mo'eid, and Synagogue: A Place of Encounter and Presence

Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei, Exodus 35:1-38:20/ 38:21-40:38 | By Mark Greenspan

“Synagogue Life” by Rabbi Craig T. Scheff, (pp.61-80) in *The Observant Life*

Introduction

The final chapters of Exodus contain an elaborate description of the building of the Tabernacle. Although many of these details of this project appear in earlier chapters the Torah goes on to describe the completion of the task as well as the various materials used in the implementation of the Tabernacle. In the final verses of Exodus we learn that the building of the Tabernacle was as momentous as the creation of the world. “When Moses had finished the work” (Exodus 40:33) echoes the language of creation: “On the seventh day God had finished the work that He had begun doing...” (Genesis 2:1). Once more we find the language of revelation in these final verses; the Tent of Meeting and the *Tabernacle (Mishkan)* are filled with a cloud just as Mount Sinai was surrounded by a cloud when God’s Presence descended on the mountain. The differences between the synagogue and the Tabernacle notwithstanding we are left to wonder about the connections between these two institutions. The Tabernacle was Israel’s first place of worship. The furnishings of our synagogue allow us to connect the synagogue with the Tabernacle: the *ner tamid*, the ark, and the *menorah* were among the furnishings of the ancient *Mishkan*. The Tabernacle was more than just a dwelling place of God; it was also a Tent of Meeting. What was the connection between these two terms and what do they reveal about the synagogue today?

The Torah Connection

When Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud settled upon it and the presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. When the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on their various journeys; but if the cloud did not lift, they would not set out until such time as it did lift. For over the tabernacle, a cloud of the Lord rested by day and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys.

- Exodus 40:33-38

Cloud...Presence: *the function of the Tabernacle was to create a portable Sinai, a means by which a continued avenue of communication with God could be maintained. As the people moved away from the mountain of revelation, they needed a visible, tangible symbol of God's ever-abiding Presence in their midst... The Hebrew term k'vod for God's Presence, also rendered "majesty" actually expresses His intangible immanence.*

- Nahum Sarna, Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary, Exodus

At this point, there are two embodiments of holiness in the Israelite camp: the Tent of Meeting (Obel Mo'ed) and the Tabernacle (Mishkan). We can think of them as representing a theology of encounter and a theology of presence. There are moments (a wedding, the birth of a child, an escape from danger) when God erupts into our lives with a special intensity that transforms us but that is too intense to be lived constantly. Then there are times when God is a constant presence in our lives (marriage, parenthood, and years of good health) in an equally real but less intense manner. The challenge is to recognize God's presence in our lives without it becoming so ordinary that we take it for granted...

- David L Lieber and Jules Harlow. *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*. pp. 571-2

What is the meaning of the verse: "But as for me, let my prayer be made unto Thee, O Lord, in an acceptable time?" (Psalms 69:14). When is the time acceptable? When the congregation prays. Rabbi Yossi ben Rabbi Hanina says: You learn it from here: "Thus says the Lord, In an acceptable time have I answered thee." (Isaiah 49:8) Rabbi Aha ben Rabbi Hanina says: You learn it from here: "Behold, God despises not the mighty." (Job 36:5). And it is further written: "He hath redeemed my soul in peace so that none came nigh me; for they were many who strove with me." (Psalms 55:19) It has been taught also to the same effect; Rabbi Nathan says: How do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, does not despise the prayer of the congregation? For it is said: "Behold, God despises not the mighty." And it is further written: "He hath redeemed my soul in peace so that none came nigh me..." The Holy One, blessed be He, says: If a man occupies himself with the study of the Torah and with works of charity and prays with the congregation, I account it to him as if he had redeemed Me and My children from among the nations of the world.

Resh Lakish said: Whosoever has a Synagogue in his town and does not go there in order to pray, is called an evil neighbor. For it is said: "Thus says the Lord, as for all Mine evil neighbors, that touch the inheritance which I have caused My people Israel to inherit." (Jeremiah 12:14) And more than that, he brings exile upon himself and his children. For it is said: "Behold, I will pluck them up from off their land, and will pluck up the house of Judah from among them." (Jeremiah 12:14)

- BT B'rakhot 8a

Rabbi Aha ben Rabbi Hanina says: "Happy is the man that bearkens to Me, determined to enter within My doors" (Proverbs 8:34). *What is meant by "determined to enter within My doors"? The Holy One said, When you go to pray within the synagogue, do not remain standing at the outer door, praying there. Make sure that you go through the door beyond the outer one. Scripture does not say, "Determined to enter within My door," but, "Within My doors;" at least two doors. Why? Because God counts your steps and gives you a reward for each step you take. The Holy One said: If you do so, know that you will face the Presence. What follows directly? "Whoever finds Me finds life" (Proverbs 8:35), intimating that the Holy One asked: Did one ever come to a synagogue and not find My glory? Moreover, said Rabbi Aibu, when you sit in a synagogue, the Holy One stands over you to wait on you, as is said, "God stands in the congregation of God" (Psalms 82:1). The Holy One went on to say: Not only do you face the Presence in the synagogue, but you go out of there laden with blessings, as it is said, "Whoever find Me finds life, and obtains favor of the Lord" (Proverbs 8:35).*

- Deuteronomy Rabbah 7:2; BT B'rakhot 8a

Our Rabbis taught: *Synagogues must not be treated disrespectfully. It is not right to eat or to drink in them nor to dress up in them, nor to stroll about in them, nor to go into them in summer to escape the heat and in the rainy season to escape the rain, nor to deliver a private funeral address in them. But it is right to read Scriptures in them and to repeat the Mishnah and to deliver public funeral addresses. Rabbi Judah said: When is this? When they are still in use; but when they are abandoned, grass is allowed to grow in them, and it should not be plucked, so as to excite compassion'. Who was speaking about grass? There is an omission, and the statement should read thus: 'They should be swept and watered so that grass should not grow in them.' Rabbi Judah said: When is this? When they are in use; but when they are abandoned, grass is allowed to grow in them; if grass does grow, it is not plucked, so that it may excite compassion.*

Rav Asi said: The synagogues of Babylon have been built with a stipulation (that it could be used for other purposes) and even so they must not be treated disrespectfully. What, for instance, is this? Doing calculations for business purposes in them. Rav Asi said: A synagogue in which people make calculations is used for keeping a dead body in overnight. You actually think it is used for keeping a dead body in? Is there no way otherwise? But say in the end a met mitzvah will be kept there over night. (Met Mitzvah is a person who has no one else to see to his or her burial)

'Nor to go into them in summer to escape the heat and in the rainy season to escape the rain'. For instance, Rabina and Rav Ada ben Mattanah were once standing and asking questions of Raba when a shower of rain came on. They went into the synagogue, saying, 'We have gone into the synagogue not because of the rain, but because the discussion of a legal point requires clarity, like a clear day.

- BT M'gillah 28a-b

Reflections

As a portable Sinai the Tabernacle was both physically and symbolically central to the camp of the ancient Israelites. Not only was it placed at the very center of the camp so that the tribes faced their spiritual center but it was a kind of compass that gave the people a sense of direction even as they faced the uncertainty of the wilderness on their journey to the Promised Land. But something more than just the Tabernacle appeared at the center of the camp. The Torah uses the terms Mishkan and Ohel Mo'ed interchangeably and sometimes even in combination as we see in this passage. It is hard to discern what the difference is between these two terms and to what extent they are similar to one another. Elsewhere in Exodus the Tent of Meeting appears to be completely separate from the Tabernacle. Following the sin of the golden calf the Torah states: "Now Moses would take the Tent and pitch it outside the camp, at some distance from the camp. It was called the Tent of Meeting, and whoever sought the Lord would go out to the Tent of Meeting that was outside the camp..." (Exodus 33:7). Interestingly the Tent of Meeting appears to pre-exist the building of the Tabernacle and the priestly practices. It was a place of encounter where people came to seek the Lord. They could only look on in awe when confronting the Tabernacle but the Ohel Mo'ed true to its name was a place of meeting. This might have led the authors of the commentary in Etz Hayim to suggest two different types of theologies and two ways in which we experience God: encounter and presence. It seems to me that the contemporary synagogue might be seen in similar fashion.

Why do people come to the synagogue? For some it is a place for occasional encounter: the High Holy Days and life cycle events. Others believe the synagogue is a symbol of God's constant presence who we encounter daily or weekly through prayer, study, and community. Either way these images suggest that God is or at least should be at the very center of the synagogue something we all too often forget.

The Talmudic passages above suggest some of the ways in which the synagogue as the abode of God's presence is reflected in halakhah and practice. While a Jew can pray in any place and at any time there is something special about praying in the context of community. Entering into the synagogue is the way in which we enter into the presence of God. Unfortunately we have secularized sacred space and have forgotten that there is something special and holy about the synagogue that ought to be reflected in our behavior, dress, interactions, and in conversations that take place there. Synagogues are Jewish Centers rather than houses of worship. We tend to speak of them as families (even though we don't treat one another like family) and even businesses (though too often we don't run them in a very businesslike fashion). It seems to me that it is time to return to the fundamental purpose of synagogues: as a place of encounter and a place in which to experience God's presence.

Halakhah L'ma-aseh

1. *In an ideal world, the halakhah as it applies to the life of the synagogue would operate simply as an extension of its application to the life of the individual Jew. The synagogue community, however, is an exceedingly complex institution and, as a result, the issues it faces are rarely simply the individual issues writ large.*
- *The Observant Life*, p.61
2. *The rabbi is considered the teacher of Jewish law for the individual community, as well as the authority for religious practices and halakhic decisions of a congregation. A rabbi in the Conservative Movement is guided and sometimes bound by the decisions of the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards...*
- *The Observant Life*, p.62
3. *While individual synagogues are free to ratify the by-laws that govern those institutions and to define the rights and privileges of the individual members, the rights and privileges of membership in a synagogue may be extended only to individuals who*

are considered Jewish by Conservative halakhic standards.
- *The Observant Life*, p. 63

4. *While membership in the synagogue may be restricted to the Jewish spouse...the non-Jewish spouse should be encouraged to attend services, to participate in educational activities, and to participate in the social events of the synagogue, including programs of the synagogue's affiliate organization.*
- *The Observant Life*, p.64
5. *Just as the synagogue must strive to be a model of observance for its congregants in ritual matters, so must the synagogue be cognizant of its status as a role model and representative of the Jewish community in its business dealings.*
- *The Observant Life*, p. 74
6. *Just as rabbis and cantors serve as role models for their communities, so do teachers and administrators. "Anyone who represents the congregation - on any level, coming into contact in a regular and significant fashion with a member will inevitably impact on that individual...It is natural to assume that those who represent the congregation may be perceived as synonymous with the congregation." (Jerome Epstein)*
- *The Observant Life*, p.75

Questions to Ponder

1. There is a debate in rabbinic literature about whether the Tabernacle was built as an expression of love and connection between God and Israel or as an act of atonement following the incident of the golden calf. Which argument makes most sense to you and why?
2. In what ways is the Tabernacle/Tent of Meeting a symbol of God's presence and to what extent is it an opportunity for encounter? How are these two experiences present in the contemporary synagogue?
3. How is the Tabernacle different from the contemporary synagogue? How do you account for these differences?
4. In what ways is a rabbi a *mara d'atra*, the authority of the congregation, in matters of Jewish practice and tradition? Does the rabbi have real authority if he/she can be fired by his or her board when they disagree with him/her?
5. To what extent should a synagogue itself model the halakhic behavior it wishes to instill in its members? Should it mirror the general pattern of observance displayed by its own members or should it set a higher standard for itself?
6. Do you find your synagogue to be a godly place? Why or why not?

Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan