**Parashat Trumah:** 

**When a Grain of Sand Becomes the Divine Sanctuary**

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Dear Friends,

After a book and a half in which God demands to be found everywhere, He seems to be changing direction. In this week's parasha God requests a sanctuary in which to reside. The change is so dramatic that many of the traditional interpreters were stunned. The endless number of explanations given to this new course indicates considerable bewilderment. How can it be that our God in Heaven, the God of the four corners of the earth, He who is everywhere – asks for a dwelling place?

Parashat Trumah is the first among five consecutive parashot which deal with the construction of the Tabernacle, the Mishkan. The comparison is often made between the Creation of the world, which has only two chapters devoted to it, and the Mishkan, taking up 15 chapters.

More perplexing than any of this is God's promise that if Bnei Yisrael contribute what is necessary to build the Mishkan and then build it, then He will actually dwell within them (and not within the Mishkan!).

**The Mishkan as an Allegory**

Traditional interpretations explain that the Mishkan is an allegory. It is an allegory for Creation; it is a microcosm of the universe; it is the essence of Jewish history; a reflection of the human qualities; the manifestation of the entire written and oral Torah, and more.

I have written about some of these interpretations in the past. This year, I would like to suggest an additional explanation, with the wise help of the Rambam (Maimonides):

**The Mishkan as a Transition Object**

Maimonides claims that the Mishkan, as well as the sacrifices that took place in it, were never a lofty Divine ideal. Quite the contrary! They were a stage of transition, a necessary step required in order to wean Bnei Yisrael from the prevalent customs of idolatry. It was impossible to expect them to abandon their deep-seated ways from one day to the next, so it was done gradually. The first step was to replace grand Egyptian temples and the breathtaking ceremonies of idol worship with a much simpler model - a mobile cloth tent and minimal ceremony, that did not allow for much of a spontaneous outpouring of idolatrous spirituality. Later in history, the cloth tent was replaced by Solomon’s wooden Temple, mostly because King David could not stand the thought that he lived in a magnificent palace, while God dwelled in a tent. A major regression happened when Herod erected a monstrous Temple, but those was merely the final twitches of the Temple modality and the sacrificial cult. Both would eventually be replaced by prayer and personal observance. This is the Rambam's explanation.

Most other interpreters have a hard time with this explanation. From their point of view, it does not make sense that the Torah would "waste" fifteen tedious chapters and another entire book (Leviticus) on a weaning process from Paganism to Monotheism. From the other rabbis' perspective there has to be a lofty, Divine purpose for the construction of the Mishkan, and not a "lowly" sociological one.

**God Isn't**

However, the Rambam's explanation goes much deeper that it seems. The weaning was not only from the grand temples and spectacular ceremonies. A far more radical and intrinsic change in human psyche is taking place here, taking us from an object-God towards a Deity that has no form whatsoever.

In the Rambam's 13 Principles (which appear in the siddur as "Yigdal") we find the following words:

Exalted be the Living God and praised, He exists – unbounded by time is His existence;

He is One – and there is no unity like His Oneness – Inscrutable and infinite is His Oneness;

He has no semblance of a body nor is He corporeal – nor has His holiness any comparison;

He preceded every being that was created – the First, and nothing precedes His precedence;

In other words, “God isn’t”.

How on earth (literally) does one relate to that which isn't? And if, as the prayer says, He is not and He has no semblance of a body, how is it that we refer to God as being in heaven, or even in our hearts, or everywhere for that matter? How can “isn’t-ness” be anywhere?

God, according to Maimonides, has no place in the world. The God of Israel IS "The Place", "Hamakom", with a capital H. And this requires weaning!

When Yaakov awakens from his famous ladder dream he exclaims "There is, indeed, God in this place and I did not know." The midrash explains it thus:

"Rav Huna, in the name of Rav Ami, said: Why do we call the Holy One Blessed Be He "Makom" (place)? Because He is the place of the world and the world is not His place… (as God says to Moshe on Mount Sinai, Sh'mot 33) "Here Makom is with me”. In other words, the Holy One Blessed Be He is the Makom (the place) of the world, and the world is not His place."

Contrary to Spinoza's Pantheistic point of view, in which the Divine is the totality of the universe or of nature, the Midrash claims that the universe dwells within the Divine. This is a very important distinction! In the latter the Divine is "the place of the world", and "the world is not His place".

The capitalized H suggests that He is the place where everything exists, and not the reverse. Not only is the world absorbed within the Divine, and not only is He everywhere; but everything IS the Divine – there is nothing that isn't.

This is tough on the limited human mind for it is not our experience! Human consciousness and subjective experience is very limited. Even for the believers among us, God is definitely not experienced everywhere. We “see” God in a beautiful view, in the eyes of our loving partners, but can the dirty, poverty-stricken slums be Divine too? The Kotzker Rebbe is said to have declared "God exists only in the place that we allow Him to enter".

God, then, does not need a Mishkan; humans do. Humans need to build a place in which we can experience "letting God in", even though this obviously is not necessary if He is everywhere.

**The Advanced Version: The Greatest Paradox**

If you are still with me, let's return to Rambam’s weaning idea. The Mishkan is also called "Ohel Mo'ed", The Tent of Meeting, where Moshe from now on will "meet" God.

**18** And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of beaten work shall you make them, at the two ends of the ark-cover. **20** And the cherubim shall spread out their wings on high, screening the ark-cover with their wings, with their faces one to another; toward the ark-cover shall the faces of the cherubim be **22** And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the ark-cover, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel. (Sh'mot 25)

This description is so wonderful in so many ways, but in terms of our discussion it emphasizes just how much God is really not present in the Mishkan. His presence is limited to a tiny spot within it – that small gap between the two cherubim. That's it! Not only is His presence located in a tiny space, it is in the space BETWEEN two objects - the cherubim - and not in the tangible objects themselves.

A well-known philosophical principle is that within a given space there is an infinite amount of space. The explanation is simple. Take one centimeter, divide it; then divide it again, now again, and so on… ad infinitum. This is how a paradox, which the human mind cannot fathom, is created: there is an infinite amount of space within one centimeter, and that infinity is called God.

**"None" Embodies "All"**

The Rambam tries to teach us the biggest paradox there is: on the one hand, God isn’t! For He does not exist in objects. On the other hand, God is the infinity that exists in every particle – fills it, embodies it.

The Mishkan enables US to imagine God's presence in the world, while at the same time the same Mishkan is also a reminder of the opposite – that it isn't possible to contain God's presence anywhere or in anything. His presence in the Tabernacle IS THE SPACE BETWEEN, NOT WITHIN.

Unlike most of us, Moshe was not afraid of paradox. This is why he was the only prophet to encounter God face to face. Moshe's greatness lies not only in the fact that he was privileged to do so whereas we are not. We, too, can encounter God face to face when and where we wish to, but only when we are able to accept the great paradox. But we are not there yet, and the weaning continues. It turns out that we are still idolatrous, in our own modern ways. But I would argue that surprisingly, we are closer than ever before. We are a few steps away from fathoming the unfathomable. We are closer than ever to giving up hope that we will ever find God in things, and surrendering to the Infinite, to His formlessness, which embodies everything.

We are ever so close to knowing that every grain of sand is a holy Tabernacle for God, but so too are the tiny spaces between those grains of sand.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha