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ד"ס

Parashat Terumah Part II Tabernacle, Symbolism and Prophecy

1. Regarding the Tabernacle

After the lawgiving, while Israel was still at Mount Sinai, G-d transferred His glory from the mountain to the portable sanctuary (the Tabernacle) that was established to accompany Israel on its journey to the promised land. As the Torah represents G-d's presence to abide in this sanctuary, it was called the *mishkan*, or "abode," and He thereby "dwelled" among the people. In the Torah, the term *mishkan* is employed almost exclusively for this central sanctuary, the only exception being "*mishkan* Korah, Dathan and Abiram" (Num. 16:24, 27), a case associated with the rebellious undertaking to co-opt Moses' authority, apparently hinting at an attempt to set up an alternative sanctuary.

Internal indications, tradition and extra-biblical parallels uniformly point toward understanding the descriptive details of the Tabernacle, as well as its furnishings and rituals, as possessing symbolic meaning. We will discuss several prominent examples.

The Tabernacle tent, also called the *ohel mo'ed* (the Tent of Meeting), comprised two chambers, an outer holy sanctum and a smaller, inner Holy of Holies. The outer chamber contained three furnishings: the lampstand (menorah) on the southern side, the incense altar in the center and on the northern side the table with the twelve loaves of the "bread of countenance" that are to always be arranged on it, replaced every Sabbath with fresh loaves. The latter detail reflects the blessing of sustenance inherent in the Sabbath day. Services on the incense altar and the lampstand were performed daily in this section.

In the smaller, inner sanctum was the ark with the *kaporet* covering. The two stone tablets were in the

ark. Two cherubim hammered out of the ark-covering rose above it, spreading their wings over it. It is specifically there, above the cherubim, that G-d's presence is represented to reside. As He is incorporeal, no tangible item is placed upon the cherubim that might be thought to be representative of His presence. A *parokhet* (curtain) separated the two chambers, preventing unnecessary viewing of the items in the inner sanctum. The curtain also served to distance from anyone's mind the notion prevalent in pagan shrines that deities ate from the food presented to them. It may also have been to serve this purpose that the loaves of bread remained on the table from Sabbath to Sabbath at which time they were given to the priests to eat. The only mandated ritual performed in the inner sanctum in the course of the year was the high priest service on Yom Kippur. Non-priests were not normally permitted in this area.

A courtyard of lower-level sanctity surrounded the tent. It is in the courtyard before the tent that all sacrifices were performed. Non-priests were permitted in this area and were permitted to participate in some portions of the service; they could learn sanctuary law and observe many of the procedures, contrary to the practice concerning non-priests in many Near Eastern cultures.

Entrance to the inner chamber required passage through the courtyard and the outer chamber. This design implemented the concept that the Deity is not to be approached abruptly nor should one come forth in a casual manner, but only with proper procedure and preparation, going through the appropriate preliminary steps. This arrangement recalls the Exodus 19 partitioning of Mount Sinai prior to revelation, a layout also common in ancient Near Eastern sanctuaries.

The entrance to the courtyard as well as to the Tent of Meeting was from the east, and the gradations of increasingly more sacred areas was toward the west. Thus, the Holy of Holies was located to the west of the holy chamber וּלְיַרְכְּתֵי הַמִּשְׁכָּן יָמָה (“And for the rear of the Tabernacle, to the west...” [Exod. 26:22]). The Rambam explains that with this alignment, the moment a worshipper entered the courtyard as well as each of its two chambers he stood with his back to the east and bowed toward the west. This was an implicit protest against the chief idolatry of the ancient world, especially in Israel’s sphere: worship of the sun. Its devotees bowed to the east, the direction of the rising sun as graphically depicted in Ezekiel 8:16 (*Guide for the Perplexed*, 3:45).

Gold was used for the furnishings of the two holy chambers (ark, *kaporet*, cherubim, table, lampstand, and incense altar), as well as for the wallboards, silver for the foundation sockets supporting the wallboards and bronze for the courtyard fixtures (sacrificial altar and basin and its stand). The preciousness of the materials used reflected the hierarchy of sanctity. All materials were voluntarily donated except for the half-shekel silver payment (which we will discuss in a forthcoming study).

Since the Tent of Meeting was where G-d would impart to Moses that which was necessary to communicate to Israel (Exod. 25:22; 29:42; 30:6; Num. 7:89), it may well be that its structure and furnishings were designed with the goal of promoting prophecy and spiritual inspiration, a topic we will discuss shortly.

There is no indication in the Torah that at some point in the future the Tabernacle was to cease to be the nation’s central sanctuary in favor of a stationary building structure. The statements in Deuteronomy 12 regarding “the place Hashem chooses to have His name reside” are ambiguous and do not appear to mean that His name (which apparently is represented by the tablets) is to reside in a permanent, stationary location. As Rabbi S. D. Sassoon pointed out, circumstances that inevitably arise may render it preferable that “His name” be moved to the location of the new national leadership. This would be consistent with Exodus 20:21, which, after allowing a plain earthen alter for sacrifices, states, “in every place that I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you to bless you” (see *Natan Hochmah*

Lishlomo, Heb. pp. 64 ff.). It is not at all clear that the message of that pronouncement had been superseded. Subsequently, Kings David and Solomon opted for a solid, stationary sanctuary structure and received divine approval, but it is not clear from the text that it was necessarily to remain so permanently.

2. Ark, *Kaporet* and Cherubim

The tablets, which presumably were carved out from Mount Sinai and which had the Decalogue that was proclaimed on the mountain inscribed on them, were powerful reminders of the Sinaitic revelation and the covenant. This important function is incorporated in their full name לְחַת הַעֵדוּת (“tablets of testimony”). Because of them the Torah speaks of the אָרוֹן הַעֵדוּת (“ark of testimony”) and the מִשְׁכַּן הַעֵדוּת (“Tabernacle of testimony”). The tablets contained the official version of the essence of the G-d-Israel covenant. Since ancient Near Eastern covenant protocol called for placement of an imperishable copy of a covenant at the feet of the deity, the tablets were placed in the ark in the Holy of Holies at the “footstool” of the Deity.

There is a question about the derivation of the word *kaporet* – a term exclusively employed for the covering of the ark. In Semitic languages, the most widely attested meaning of the relevant possibilities of the *k-p-r* root is “cover.” However, it is considered likely – as rendered by the Septuagint – that *kaporet* is derived from כַּפָּרָה (“atonement”). The presence of an article designated for this purpose at the very holiest location would give great prominence to the monumental institution that constitutes repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation with G-d. The *kaporet* is indeed conspicuous in the atonement ritual of the Yom Kippur service (Lev. 16:13-15). When G-d transmitted instructions for the construction of the incense altar (Exod. 30:1 ff.) – a furnishing of the outer sanctum – He made a point that its placement was to be עַל הַעֵדוּת אֲשֶׁר לְפָנֵי הַכַּפֹּרֶת אֲשֶׁר עַל הַעֵדוּת (“before the *kaporet* that is upon the testimony” [v. 6]). The incense altar appears to have been linked with *kapara* from its very origin, as part of the atonement program for the golden calf apostasy, as we shall contend in our study on *Parashat Ki Tissa Part I*.

Of course the word *kapara* denoting atonement may itself be derived from the concept of “covering” the sin, or protecting the sinner who is repentant from its

consequences. Thus, the term for the ark's covering may have a dual meaning.

A number of scholars have made a strong case to view the word *kapara* as derived from a Semitic word that means "cleansing." According to this the fundamental concept involved in atonement is the sinner cleansing himself, and in biblical symbolism, undertaking the purification process.

G-d states to Moses that, "I will speak with you from above the *kaporet*, between the two cherubim that are above the ark of the testimony all that I command you for the children of Israel" (Exod. 25:22; also see 30:6; Num. 7:89). G-d's existence is here depicted in sound without sight, a more rarefied reality than a visible being, obviously to negate any construal of a corporeal being. Despite the fact that the Torah often speaks of G-d in anthropomorphic terms ("The Torah speaks in the language of man"), here, in His abode, it was preferred to lessen such descriptions.) In Leviticus 16, however, we read that Aaron is prohibited from entering the inner sanctum "at [just] any time...for in a cloud I appear above the *kaporet*" (Lev. 16:2). Some understand this to be saying that G-d's presence is depicted by a cloud above the *kaporet* while others explain the cloud to refer to the cloud of smoke that the high priest is required to raise with his incense ritual when entering the Holy of Holies.

What is the meaning of כְּרוּב and what did the cherubim represent? The Encyclopedia Judaica states: "The most plausible derivation is from the Akkadian *kāribu/kurību* (from Akk. *karābu*; 'to pray,' 'to bless'), an intercessor who brings the prayers of humans to the gods." It may very well be that the Torah converted these mythological intercessors (popular in the general culture of the time) into angels serving G-d's will.

From scriptural attestations cherubim appear to be creatures associated with G-d's throne since He is described as יָשָׁב הַכְּרוּבִים ("enthroned upon the cherubim" [e.g., Ps. 80:2; 99:1; 1 Chr. 13:6]). With outstretched wings, prepared to fly, they appear to connote His omnipresence in the world, depicted by mobility and readiness to go wherever necessary, as it states עָלָה עַל כְּרוּב וַיִּעַף ("He rode upon a cherub and flew" [2 Sam. 22:11; Ps. 18:11]). Invocation in prayer of "He who is enthroned upon the cherubim" (such as in Ps. 80:2) could mean, although not necessarily

exclusively, "He who is ready and capable of intervening instantly wherever it may be."

In referring to the cherubim above the ark, they are termed G-d's chariot וְלִתְבִנֵּית הַמְּרֻכָּבָה הַכְּרוּבִים ("and for the structure of the chariot, the cherubim" [1 Chr. 28:18]). In Ezekiel's vision of G-d's chariot, it is clear that the cherubim are distinct from the throne since the throne is there described as above the cherubim (Ezek. 1:26). Gleaning from the various scriptural attestations – which in symbolic matters need not necessarily be consistent, since different prophets may represent abstract concepts dissimilarly – G-d's invisible throne could be imagined in the Holy of Holies above the *kaporet*, upon the wings of the cherubim. It is notable that there is no physical representation of the throne whatsoever, let alone any physical representation of G-d Himself. This reflects the practice of avoiding any material representation of G-d, reflecting the all-important principles of His transcendence and incomparability, and touches on what later was termed His incorporeity.

If G-d's throne is imagined above the *kaporet*, the ark could very well be His footstool. As mentioned earlier, the widespread ancient Near Eastern practice was that the official text of a covenant would be deposited "under the feet of the deity," where it would be safe and he would constantly keep its stipulations in mind and reward and punish accordingly. Placing the tablets in the ark would be fulfillment of that detail. In 1 Chronicles 28:2b David states: "It was my intention to build a resting-place for the ark of the covenant of Hashem, for the footstool of our G-d" (לְאָרוֹן בְּרִית ה' וְלַהֲדָם רַגְלֵי אֱלֹהֵינוּ). Of course, even in the realm of symbolism such depictions cannot be taken so precisely that they would be limiting Him, as He states: "The heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool, what house can you build for Me and what place can be My resting place?" (Isa. 66:1).

The Torah also depicts cherubim as guarding the path to the tree of life (Gen. 3:24), a function related to that of the Akkadian *kurubu*, awesome creatures that were believed to protect palaces and temples in Mesopotamian culture. In the Tabernacle setting, such a meaning might indicate their safeguarding the ark against trespass by unauthorized parties, or protecting the symbol of the covenant. Their outstretched wings over the *kaporet* and their looking toward it might indicate this function.

The poles that are affixed to the rings on the sides of the ark that are used for transport “are never to be removed from it” (Exod. 25:15). This regulation is not prescribed for the poles and rings of any other Tabernacle article; it emphasizes the sanctity of the ark and proclaims that even when the ark must be transported, extra care must be taken that human hands not come close to making direct contact with it.

3. Rabbi Sassoon’s Views

The following is based on lectures of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon and on written material of his published in *Natan Hochmah Lishlomo* (Heb. section pps. 42-52).

The *ohel mo‘ed* was the place where, throughout the generations, Hashem would meet with prophets and worthy leaders of Israel to provide them inspiration and direction. In reference to the *ohel mo‘ed*, after singling out Moses as the primary recipient of His communications אֲשֶׁר אֶנְעַד לָכֶם שָׁמָּה לְדַבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ שָׁם (“For there I shall meet with you, to speak with you there” [Exod. 29:42b]), Hashem continues: וְנִעְדָתִי שָׁמָּה לְבָנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל (“I shall meet there with *bene yisrael*” v. 43). Rabbi Sassoon understood the latter clause as alluding to His “meeting” there with Israel’s leaders, even subsequent to Moses. (He pointed out that *Targum Jonathan*, which translates the next phrase וְנִקְדַּשׁ בְּכַבְדִּי as “And I will be sanctified among their leaders,” apparently reflects such an understanding.)

The rabbi also maintained that the term *bene yisrael* does not refer to all members of the nation but designated those who belonged to a particular leadership strata and who were expected to attain a higher spiritual level consistent with their status and responsibilities.* Of course, G-d’s “meeting” a member of *bene yisrael* was understood to be on three basic conditions: that the individual must be properly prepared, be sincerely motivated to benefit the nation and be truly seeking to receive sparks of prophetic emanations, with all that entails.

As the Holy of Holies symbolized G-d’s dwelling place, the holy section – in which were the table, lampstand and incense altar – symbolized His reception room. The furnishings symbolized His hospitality to guests in His abode. The rabbi understood the term for the twelve loaves of bread – לֶחֶם פָּנִים, “bread of countenance” – to essentially mean לֶחֶם קַבְּלַת פָּנִים, “bread for receiving guests,”

symbolizing a standing invitation to the suitable visitors. The lampstand, kindled each evening to provide nightlong illumination, was to accommodate those who came.

Kindling incense is well attested in the ancient world as a homeowner’s welcoming gesture to his guests. In addition, it may be that the sanctuary incense possessed a quality that contributed to opening the faculties of the soul, prompting the individual to rise beyond his ego and be more receptive to the emanations of רִיחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ (the spirit of holiness, generally referring to emanations of prophecy). Regarding the incense altar’s specific placement, although it is in the outer sanctum, an unusually long statement explicitly relates it to the ark, the testimony, the *kaporet* and apparently also to receiving communication from G-d: It is to be placed “in front of the *parokhet* that is over the ark of the testimony, in front of the *kaporet* that is over the testimony, where I will meet with you” (Exod. 30:6). This linkage is reemphasized in the instructions for kindling the incense: “Place from it before the testimony in the *ohel mo‘ed* where I will meet with you” (30:36).

Rabbi Sassoon thought it possible that the prohibition against making the prescribed incense for private use, “to smell thereof” (30:38) – a violation punishable by *karet* (being cut off) – represents the prohibition of false prophecy. In contrast to the incense of sanctuary service, associated with altruism and true prophecy, prohibited incense and false prophecy are directed to the individual’s personal gratification and associated with egoism.

Gold was extremely prominent in the Tabernacle. The boards comprising the walls were gold-coated, and all *ohel mo‘ed* furnishings were either made of gold or were gold-coated. The rabbi wrote: “The use of gold and shining jewels stirs the capacity within a person to aspire to receive the spiritual emanations from above and prompts the necessary visionary disposition. It is therefore fit to use gold in the Tabernacle, as its main purpose was for the leaders to draw from it רִיחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ and so reach the stage of prophecy, as it states “I will meet there with *bene yisrael*” (*Natan Hochmah Lishlomo*, p. 42).

Regarding the cherubim, which in this context appear to be construed differently from some of their other biblical attestations, the rabbi thought that the Torah

description of their construction was the key to their meaning. They were to arise from both sides of the *kaporet*, constructed from its material, their wings spread upward but also shielding the *kaporet*, with faces turned one to the other as well as toward the *kaporet* (25:20). They were the depiction par excellence of how an individual, particularly a leader, should comport. Outspread wings, reaching up and out, symbolize seeking inspiration from outside the individual, beyond one's ego. Their integral oneness with the *kaporet* indicates their foundation and connection with the tablets and the law. Facing each other connotes the social dimension, meaning that one seeking inspiration is not to remain in private meditation indefinitely but must interact with (and care for) others. At the same time they face the *kaporet*, dedicated to the symbolism of the tablets. (The invocation of יָשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִּים ("enthroned upon the cherubim") in prayer may refer to Hashem's desire for a more perfect society.)

Following is a relevant excerpt from Rabbi Sassoon's *Reality Revisited*:

It is not easy for a person to be at all times conscious of the continuous inflow of the creative field into him. In the Pentateuch there are many precepts expressly designed to heighten sensitivity to this field. Sensitivity to the existence of the world of the non-ego and to its demands is called holiness. "Ye shall be holy unto your G-d" is added to a large number of precepts, in particular in the chapter on holiness in Leviticus, and these holiness laws often terminate with the expression: "I am the Lord." This would indicate that holiness brings about a purification of the inner sense which makes a man conscious of the presence of the Lord standing over him.

Once the creative downflow of the Divine is sensed, a new scale with which to measure values is granted...

It follows that a person's judgment when confronted with choice in which it is difficult to judge, would be greatly facilitated if the person would think what would G-d, who wants the continuity and perfection of the world order, desire of him. Such a thought immediately reduces the self-importance of the ego and thereby enables a choice to be made from a more impersonal point of view and hence on a healthier basis. This is one

of the points at which the factor of intention becomes so important...

This constellation of thoughts and perceptions leads directly to the imperative nature of that "must" which makes itself so universally felt in serious moral decisions...

As far as the individual is concerned the Divine will demands of him to bend his energies to acts which will let the non-ego or holiness play a part in the direction of the life of the individual and the life of society (Abacus Press, pp. 200-201; reissued by Feldheim Publishers).

Rabbi Sassoon was concerned that one should not mistakenly think that in Torah law, as well as in the authentic interpretive tradition, a ritually pure non-priest seeking רִיחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ, was prohibited from entering the outer sanctum. Since such entry is not to present an offering or without purpose but to seek communion with the divine spirit, it is permitted. When King Uziah entered the outer sanctum to kindle incense, the priests did not oppose him because he entered but because he presented an incense offering (2 Chr. 26:16-18). The book of Ezekiel specifies a place close to the holy chamber reserved for the chieftain, "that he may be able to eat bread in the presence of G-d" (Ezek. 44:3).

Regarding a ritually pure non-priest who enters the outer sanctum, the 18th-century rabbinic authority David Pardo wrote: "According to the Rambam there is no negative biblical prohibition or punishment, but there is a minor prohibition" (*Hasdeh David* commentary on *Tosefta Kelim B.Q.* 1:9). Rabbi Sassoon was of the opinion that for one sincerely seeking prophetic inspiration such entry would be permitted, indeed, it would be fulfilling the original function. Similarly, Rabbi Haim Halevy Soloveitchik, explaining the Rambam, writes: "as the prohibition for a *Levi* or *Yisrael* to enter the holy chamber is only when it is without purpose, one who enters [to repair] is permitted to do so" (*Laws of Entering the Sanctuary* 1:15). Here too, Rabbi Sassoon thought that entering for prophetic inspiration to benefit the nation is the highest of purposes and surely is permitted. (Also see *Pirqa R.El.* 38.)

The Talmud did not discuss this *halakha*, since by late Second Temple times the nation's social organization

was radically changed and the *bene yisrael* leadership strata were extinct, not to be reinstated. As is often the case, discussion of a historical matter that was no longer practiced in the Second Temple was not incorporated in the Talmud. Concerning implications for the future, however, Rabbi Sassoon felt that a proper understanding of the entire matter is important and relevant.

Endnote

* Among the indications Rabbi Sassoon cited for this meaning is the following cluster of phrases at the beginning of *Parashat Terumah*:

- Hashem commands Moses to speak to *bene yisrael* that “they shall take for Me *terumah*” (תִּקְחוּ לִי תְרוּמָה [Exod. 25:2a]), not “give” or “separate” *terumah*. Excluding strained interpretations, “they” (*bene yisrael*) are to take from others, indicating that they are a leadership group going out to the people to collect.

- “From each man whose heart so prompts him you shall take My *terumah*” (Exod. 25:2b). “You (plural) shall take My *terumah*” (תִּקְחוּ אֶת תְּרוּמָתִי) refers to Moses together with *bene yisrael*, who had just been commissioned to assist Moses in collecting the *terumah* and are now addressed in second person together with Moses.
- The next verse begins with, “Following is the *terumah* you shall take from them.” Again, the verse employs a plural “you” and a “them,” (תִּקְחוּ מֵאֵתֵם).

Rabbi Sassoon thought that this notion of *bene yisrael* being a leadership group among the Israelites adds a practical note to Torah law. Subtle and sophisticated demands cannot be fully comprehended, internalized and fulfilled by the masses in the initial stages of their exposure to the details of the Torah. In the early stages of the nation’s development it was *bene yisrael* who were expected to carry the responsibility of comprehensive fulfillment of the details of the law.

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