



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Terumah 5774

By Evan Wolkenstein

February 1, 2014

In *Parashat Terumah*, the Israelites receive the blueprints for a majestic tent—the *mishkan*—that will eventually house the magnificent Ark of the Covenant. As we read the vivid description, we can picture its grandeur. During the Israelites' journeys through the desert, the *mishkan* serves as a portable temple, with the home of God's indwelling, the Ark, at its center.¹ The Israelite tribes camp around it, placing it at the heart of the nation.

While the detailed beauty of the Ark sounds stunning, the medieval commentator Abravanel wonders about its design. The first of the Divine Laws prohibits graven images of any kind, replications of any being, heavenly or earthly.² But upon the cover of the ark perch two *cherubim*, winged human forms.³ It would seem that by including these forms, God is breaking God's own Law.

There is a possible resolution to this seeming contradiction in the very details of space and shape that make this *parashah* and its focus on design so fascinating. "From above the cover," says God, "from between the two *cherubim* that are on top of the Ark of the Covenant,"⁴ God will meet with humanity. The voice of God emerges not from the mouth of any graven image, but from the empty space between two faces.

From the place of human encounter emerges the Divine Voice. Certainly, in every act of true listening, of honest speaking, and thus in every act of compassion, in every heartfelt encounter, in every ethical interaction we can hear God's voice. In other words, if idolatry is to hear the voice of God emerging from a block of gold, then the opposite of idolatry is to see God's face in every human being, to hear God's voice emerging from the relationship of any two beings, face to face, eye to eye, *ish el achiv*—from one person to another.⁵

Yet the presence of the sacred in human interactions does not occur automatically in the encounter. There is a crucial foundation upon which this relationship takes place, a vital basis where our relationships must be rooted.

Taking a closer look at who or what resides in the *mishkan*, we find that God is not, in fact, the tent's primary resident. Rather, at the center of this sacred structure is the Law—the two stone tablets chiseled during Revelation at Sinai, when the human and heavenly worlds met. Though the tablets contain only ten laws, they are the symbol of the covenantal relationship that guides Israel's every behavior. The five laws on the right-hand tablet guide us in the realm of *ben adam l'Makom*—between humans and the Omnipresent—and the five laws on the left-hand tablet guide us in the realm of *ben adam l'chavero*—between humans and their brethren. In that sense, the core of the *mishkan* is a monument to Divine ethical vigilance. The Ark, then, is not a platform for God crowned by two idols,

¹ Shmot 25:8.

² Shmot 20:4.

³ Shmot 25:20.

⁴ Shmot 25:22.

⁵ Shmot 25:20; literally, "A man to his brother."

but a complex model for Divine relationship. God dwells among us when we build relationships that are founded on morality and focused on the encounter.

The *mishkan*, likewise, is a model. The Ark sits at its core, representing righteous relationship, and the *mishkan* places this relationship in the context of a building, an institution. For the nascent nation of Israel, the *mishkan* was not only the site of religious service, but also the seat of legislation,⁶ of conflict resolution⁷ and even of the military.⁸ It is not enough to strive for correct relationships one-on-one or even within our own homes—the *mishkan* challenges us to build our most important institutions in this same model.

To actualize its lesson, we must demand of our own governments an equivalent commitment to both the human encounter and the ethical foundations upon which it must rest. The *parashah's* attention to detail speaks to the kind of vigilance our own society must have, ensuring that this ethical-relational commitment is present in our governing structures at all levels, in every aspect. We must use this as our model for the way elections are carried out, the way checks and balances are calculated, the commitment to truthful reports in all public communications and the way domestic and international policies are developed and implemented. All systems should exemplify this commitment, ensuring the safety, freedom and dignity of all people.

We invoke the *mishkan* by studying it, by building our world in its image. By choosing to adopt its particular architectural style and the values that it embodies, we make ourselves in the image of the Master Architect.



Evan Wolkenstein is the Director of Experiential Education and a Tanach teacher at the Jewish Community High School of the Bay in San Francisco. He understands working with teenagers as a pathway to helping students understand the world around them. Evan holds a Master's Degree in Jewish Education from Hebrew University and a Certificate of Advanced Jewish Study from the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem. He has a passion for learning about world music and dance, the sublime short story, and how to brew the perfect cup. Evan can be reached at matthewevan23@yahoo.com.

This week's Dvar Tzedek was originally published in 2008.

⁶ Dvarim 17:9.

⁷ Shmot 22:10.

⁸ Bamidbar 10:35.

©2014 American Jewish World Service

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

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.

45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org • www.ajws.org