Our parshah, Vayakhel, describes not only Moshe’s call for donations to the construction of the Tabernacle, the mishkan, but also the community’s generous response. What is the role of the mishkan in the lives of the Israelites that caused them to respond so generously?

The mishkan, literally “dwelling-place,” is the place where God and Israel meet. It is here that God’s divine presence, the Shechinah (from the same root as mishkan), dwells in the midst of Israel. It is the means by which God becomes present in the very center of the Israelite community and in the hearts of the Israelites. God instructs, “let them make me a mishkan and I will dwell (shakhanti) within them (betokham).” The Sefat Emet, a Polish Chassidic master, reads this as “within them truly” (betokham mamash). That is, God will dwell within the very essence of each Israelite.

Prior to the mishkan, the Israelites’ relationship with the divine was with the transcendent, miraculous God of the splitting of the Red Sea and the revelation at Sinai. At Sinai, the people trembled in fear at the awesome revelation of the divine and retreated from a direct personal encounter. It is only through the mishkan, the earthly dwelling-place of God, that a more intimate encounter becomes possible. Indeed, the mishkan is not just any meeting place, but, as both the midrash and Kabbalistic literature make clear, a place of great intimacy, the bridal chamber of God and Israel where the truest level of intimacy can manifest after the marriage at Mt. Sinai.

The intimate erotic nature of the mishkan can be seen in the beautiful fabrics and the fine metals which are the adornments of the Shekinah, the divine bride, and the hangings of Her wedding chamber. Similarly, the cherubim in the mishkan, who face each other with outspread wings, are, we are told in the Talmud, in fact intertwined in an erotic embrace, and erotic significance is given to other verses and gifts. Finally, following the midrash, we can see the similarity between the word for “completing” (vayakhel or kalot) the mishkan and the word for “bride” (kalah), an indication that the completion of the mishkan was also the consummation of this divine-human marriage.

In the process of constructing the mishkan, then, God is transformed from the awesome divine Other, unapproachable and incomprehensible, to the intimate divine Beloved, present in the midst of Israel. It is the act of generosity, the very process of giving, that actualizes the opening of the heart that in turn makes intimacy possible.

1 Called, as it is, the Tent of Meeting, Shmot 35:21, 38:8
2 Shmot 25:8
3 Shmot 19:16, 20:15-18
4 See the opening drashot of Pesikta de-Rav Kahana and Zohar II 179b, l 239a
5 Shmot 35:5-8; see Zohar II 235a
6 Shmot 37:9, Yoma 54a
7 For instance, we find hidden erotic significance in the peculiar verse which reads literally, “and the men came on the women, all the generous of heart…” (Shmot 35:22). Similarly, the donations of the women’s mirrors are accepted because of their erotic significance (Shmot 38:8 and Rashi there).
8 Bereshit 2:2, Shmot 40:33, Bamidbar 7:1, I Melachim 7:40
9 See the opening drashot of Pesikta de-Rav Kahana. The partitions and curtains of the mishkan can be seen kabbalistically as the garments of God who is undressed by the mystic, represented by Moshe as he enters the mishkan, who then joins the divine in erotic embrace. See this idea of the garments of God in R. Joseph Gikatilla, Sha’arei Orah, Mosad Bialik, pp. 195-6, 214-5.
Again and again in the parshah we are told of the generous of heart and noble of spirit who contributed to the mishkan. This is a generosity not only of possessions, but one that reaches even deeper, as we are told, “take from yourselves an offering to God, all the generous of heart.” That is, a literal taking from yourselves, your experience, your wisdom and particularity, and offering it to the Beloved. Before, alienated by God’s distance at the peak of Mount Sinai, the people could only express their generosity to the illusion of divinity in the Golden Calf. Now, inviting God into their midst, the natural generosity of intimacy is properly expressed.

Just as God is ultimately both foreign and intimate, both self and other, so this is true of our fellow human beings. We can experience our fellow humans as alienated, even antagonistic, others, or as intimate beloved companions. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, alienated by God’s otherness, it is often easy to feel disconnected and not responsible for those who are most other, most unlike us. This disconnection is apparent between us and our neighbors in the developing world, who are separated from us by distance, wealth, culture and politics. The challenge and promise of the mishkan is that we can bridge those gaps and give our fellow humans, reflections of the divine image, a place to dwell in our hearts, minds and souls and literally ‘ve-shakhanti betokham’—the I, the personhood of every individual, will dwell within us.

It is this almost mystical moment of connection, the enactment of the mishkan in our own lives, that should be the foundation for our ethical responsibility and action. Through realizing our essential intimacy with all humans, our natural generosity flows forth, allowing us to give both from our possessions and from our very selves, from the depths of our being and from the skills and experiences that we have to contribute. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we too can offer our sacrifices, our money and our generosity to enable the other to dwell within us and to give the other, like the divine, a secure dwelling-place on earth. Once we had the Tabernacle (mishkan) and the Temple (mikdash). Now we have only our hearts—hearts that can be a dwelling place for all those who are suffering, if we open them wide enough. We can build the mishkan of our hearts, making space for every human to dwell there, and so become filled with the generosity that comes from transforming the other into the beloved.

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10 See, for example, Shmot 35:21
11 Shmot 35:5
12 Shmot 32:3

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