



Caring for God

R. Tali Adler – adler@hadar.org

Parashat Terumah 5785

If you are lucky, you will live to see your parents begin to need you in the way you once needed them.

You will feel it most in the small things: lifting a cup of water to your mother's lips; adjusting the light your father can sleep. Laying a hand on his forehead.

And you will be desperately sad, but also lucky, because each time you do these things, you will remember that they once, so many times, did them for you. And you will know that you were, and are, loved.

God, too, is a parent. But God's biggest tragedy, if one can say such a thing, is that God will never grow weak or old. God will never need us to do for Him what He once did for us.

And this, perhaps, is why God asks us to build the *mishkan* (tabernacle) to give to Him what our hearts compel us. The *mishkan* is not just a site of relationship, but an opportunity for mutuality. When God says "You shall bring for me what your hearts compel you," what God is offering, in this moment, is to become a God who needs what only we can give.



The Midrash Aggadah¹ describes the building of the *mishkan* as the act of a grown child who builds a house for their father to repay him for years of care:

מדרש אגדה, שמות כז:א

ובנוהג שבעולם אם יהא לאדם בן, כל זמן שהבן קטן אביו נותן דעתו עליו, לסוך אותו, לרחוץ אותו, להאכילו ולהשקותו ולטענו על כתפו עד שיגדל. וכיון שיגדל צריך להשרות את אביו בבית נאה... אף אתם הייתם במצרים קטנים... הרחצתי אתכם במים... האכלתי אתכם... השקייתי אתכם מים... טענתי אתכם... עכשיו שעמדתן על פרקיכן, בנו לי בית, שנאמר: "ועשו לי מקדש" (שם כה ח).

Midrash Aggadah, Shemot 27:1

Usually in the world, if a parent has a child, as long as the child is young, the parent takes care of her: anoints her, washes her, feeds her, gives her to drink, and carries her on their shoulders... When she grows up, she gives her parent a beautiful house to dwell in... So too when you were in Egypt you like children... I bathed you in water... I fed you... I gave you water to drink... I carried you... Now that you are adults, build Me a home, as it says "And you shall make me a sanctuary" (Shemot 25:8).

As the child becomes an adult, her relationship with her parent develops, creating room for mutuality. While the parent does not require the specific kind of care they once provided to their child, the child can now reciprocate that love in a new way: by building them a home. So too, the *midrash* offers, God once cared for Benei Yisrael when we were in our infancy, providing us with food, water, and safety. Now, as a mature nation, we respond to God's care by offering God a place to dwell on earth.

The Midrash Tanhuma² offers a different understanding of the *mishkan*'s potential as a site for mutuality:

¹ A medieval midrashic collection published by Solomon Buber.

² Another medieval midrashic collection, with a core of much earlier material from Eretz Yisrael. This edition was also published by Solomon Buber, which often differs substantially from the standard printed versions.



מדרש תנחומא (בובר), בהעלותך ב

כביכול אמר הקב"ה למשה אמור לישראל לא בשביל שאני צריך לאורכם, אני אומר לכם להדליק נר, אלא בשביל לזכותכם.

Midrash Tanhuma (Buber), BeHa'alotkha 2

It is as if the Holy One said to Moshe, "Say to Israel: it is not because I need your light that I ask you to light a candle, rather, I ask it to give you merit."

In the *mishkan*, this *midrash* suggests, we offer God not only a dwelling place, but specific acts of care, such as the kindling of the light of the *menorah*. While God does not need our light, God allows us an opportunity to offer it as an act of love for us.

Offering light is different than building a house—it is more intimate. If we borrow the Midrash Aggadah's framing of the adult child and apply it to the Midrash Tanhuma, a new story emerges: one of an adult child who cares for a parent's needs in the specific way their parent once cared for them, as one might for an aging parent. Just as a parent makes sure that a child has light at night, so too, we kindle light for God.

We know, in truth, that God does not age, does not become infirm, does not need our light or our care. But in asking us to give, to offer, to visit, God gives us the opportunity to love Him as if He did.

The *mishkan*, in this understanding, becomes the home where we care for the aging parent who once cared for us, reciprocating the same acts of intimate care. *Korbanot* (sacrifices) become specially prepared foods for father who may no longer be able to cook for himself. The Kohen Gadol's yearly forays into the *kodesh hakodashim* (holy of holies)—visits to the bedside of a mother who can no longer leave her room.



Maybe what God is saying, when God asks us for the *mishkan*, is: “Help Me drink a glass of water. Turn on the light so I can see.” Not because He needs it, but because in doing these things for our Father, we are able to feel that we are giving back a tiny piece of what he has given us. And we know that we were, and are, loved.

Maybe what God is saying, in some way, is this: “I do not need your food, your light, your hand on my forehead.

“But please know, always, that I need you.”

