



The Blueprint of Intimacy

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Parashat Terumah opens with a divine request. God asks the Children of Israel for a contribution to achieve a specific goal: “And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8). The entire *parashah*, along with its layers of *midrash*, serves as a blueprint for how God seeks to be together with us—and how we can be together with others, even in an encounter that might otherwise seem impossible.

I. The vision and the blueprint

At the start of chapter 25, God issues a thesis statement: the *mishkan* (tabernacle) is the means—and perhaps the act of building it is the very condition—for the Divine Presence to reside within the community. This request is accompanied by a demand for absolute precision: “Exactly as I **show** you—the **blueprint/form** (*tavnit*) of the *mishkan*... so shall you make it” (25:9). From there, the chapter continues with the command to make three vessels: the ark, the table, and the *menorah*. The verse that concludes the chapter once again emphasizes: “**see** well, and follow their **blueprints/forms** (*tavnitam*) that are being **shown** to you on the mountain” (25:40).



Why this repetitive insistence on seeing the blueprint? What did Moshe actually see? The Babylonian Talmud offers two striking visions that together tell a narrative sequence:

תלמוד בבלי מנחות כט.

תניא, רבי יוסי ברבי יהודה אומר: ארון של אש ושלחן של אש ומנורה של אש ירדו מן השמים, וראה משה ועשה כמותם, שנאמר: "וראה ועשה כתבניתם אשר אתה מראה בזה".

Babylonian Talmud Menahot 29a

It was taught: R. Yose bar R. Yehudah says: An ark of fire, a table of fire, and a *menorah* of fire descended from heaven, and Moshe saw them and reproduced them, as it is said: "See well, and follow their blueprints/forms that are being shown to you on the mountain."

R. Yose bar R. Yehudah suggests that an ark, table, and *menorah* of fire descended from heaven. Moshe saw these fiery archetypes and reproduced them in the physical world.

R. Yohanan offers a different picture:

אמר רבי חייה בר אבא, אמר רבי יוחנן: גבריאל חגור כמין פסיקא ה'יה, והראה לו למשה מעשה מנורה, דכתיב: "וזה מעשה המנורה".

R. Hiyya bar Abba said R. Yohanan said: [The angel] Gavriel was wearing a kind of craftsman's belt, and he showed Moshe the construction of the *menorah*.

Whether through celestial fire or a laborer's belt, according to the narrative sequence that these *midrashim* assume, God first gives a general guideline ("Make Me a sanctuary"), and then follows it up by ensuring Moshe sees the actual blueprints. Why does God guide Moshe in such exact detail?

II. Drawing near to the Infinite

One way to view these instructions is as a guide for the unique relationship between the Infinite and the finite. God, Who is “One and beyond compare,”¹ asks for proximity and connection that people will not experience in any other relationship, and so drawing close requires a level of care and precision unlike any other relationship.

The word *tavnit* (that I translated as blueprint/form above) highlights the fundamental challenge of the *mishkan* and its role in the relationship with God. This challenge is connected to the danger within *tavnit*. In Deuteronomy (4:15,18), the Torah warns: “For your own sake, be most careful—since you saw no shape when God spoke to you—... **not to act wickedly and make for yourselves any form (*tavnit*).**”

There is a profound tension here. One *tavnit* is part of a commandment; the other is forbidden as wickedness. On the one hand, there is the form that Israel is required to follow in the context of the *mishkan*, the very form that God shows Moshe in our *parashah*; on the other hand, there is the prohibited form that appears in the book of Deuteronomy. There, the *tavnit* constitutes corruption, and one must beware of it, because it is not part of what Israel saw at Sinai.

In our attempt to draw closer to God and respond to the call of “Let them make Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell among them,” we encounter a fundamental difficulty bound up with the passage from the abstract to the material. This transition takes place before us in the verses and in the *midrash* on two levels: first, from the fiery pattern to the wooden and golden vessels; and second, from the abstract Divine Being to the *mishkan*, which possesses a defined and bounded form and substance.

¹ As told in the Yigdal prayer: אחד ואין יחיד כיחודו.



It seems that the *midrashim* are highly attuned to the repeated use of the word *tavnit* in the verses, because this repetition holds the tension and complexity at the very heart of the *mishkan*. A God without form and without image asks for a sanctuary in which to dwell.² The divine request for a *mishkan* carries with it the claim that it is possible for God to have a presence within a human, structured, tangible, physical, and defined space.

III. A blueprint for human relationship

A second approach is to view the *mishkan* as a model for human connection as well. If we seek to walk in God's ways, the *mishkan* teaches us how to "dwell" with one another.

At first glance, God's rigid blueprints seem to leave no room for human creativity. The text suggests that, for true intimacy to exist, there must be an act of deep listening and implementation of the other's needs. For a person to feel truly "at home" with another, their shared space must respect the "blueprints" of their specific will and vulnerabilities, must demonstrate attentive care.

The request to dwell together is an act of vulnerability. Trust is built when we respond precisely to what the other person actually asks for, rather than what we imagine they want. Moshe's attentiveness to the *tavnit* God asked for teaches that, through careful listening, distrust may be transformed into trust.

² As stated in the words of wonder of King Shlomo: "But will God really dwell on earth? Even the heavens to their uttermost reaches cannot contain You, how much less this House that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27).



The *mishkan* provides a defined yet non-confining space for meeting. It offers a structured response to the vulnerability of the One Who asks: “Make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.” By following the blueprint, we can create the possibility for connections—between us and others, even God—that might otherwise feel beyond our reach.

