

Parashat Terumah, 5773, 2013:

“The Mystery of Experiencing Hashem’s Divine Presence”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

One of the best-known and in some ways, most accessible verses in our *parasha* is: “And they shall make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst.” (*Sefer Shemot* 25:8, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Rashi (1040-1105) comments that the words, “And they shall make Me a sanctuary,” should be understood as, “And they shall make in My name a house of sanctity.” A careful reading of Rashi’s words reveals a clear divergence from the literal meaning of our phrase. Instead of “And they shall make Me,” (“*v’asu li*”) he writes: “And they shall make in My name” (“*v’asu lishmi*”). Two questions immediately come to mind:

1. Why did Rashi substitute “*li*” with “*lishmi*?”
2. What is the difference between these terms, i.e. is this merely a subtle nuance or is it substantive in nature?

It is to these questions that we now turn.

I believe that Rashi was bothered by the very notion that finite man could possibly create any manner of physical abode for the Almighty. In other words, how can man, with his innumerable limitations, possibly create a *makom l’Schechinah* (the indwelling of Hashem’s Presence)? This idea, at its very inception, seems to be patently absurd. Two *pasukim* (verses), in particular – and in historical order - make this point abundantly clear:

But will G-d indeed dwell with man on the earth? Behold the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You; much less this House that I [King Solomon] have built. (*Sefer Divrei Hayamim* 2:6:18)

So says the L-rd, “The heavens are My throne, and the earth is My footstool; which is the house that you will build for Me, and which is the place of My rest?” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 66:1)

In contradistinction to these and many other verses in the Tanach (Jewish Canon of Scripture), we know that Hashem, in His divine wisdom, did miraculously manifest His *Schechinah* in the *Mishkan* (Portable Desert Sanctuary) and in the two *Batei Mikdash* (Holy Temples) in Jerusalem. By way of illustration, the Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* 5:5 lists 10 explicit miracles that were part of the very fabric of the First Temple:

Ten miracles were performed for our forefathers in the Holy Temple: No woman ever miscarried because of the smell of the holy meat. The holy meat never spoiled. Never was a fly seen in the slaughterhouse. Never did the High Priest have an accidental seminal discharge on Yom Kippur. The rains did not extinguish the wood-fire burning upon the altar. The wind did not prevail over the column of smoke [rising from the altar]. No disqualifying problem was ever discovered in the Omer offering, the Two Loaves or the Showbread. They stood crowded but had ample space in which to prostrate themselves. Never did a snake or scorpion cause injury in Jerusalem. And no man ever said to his fellow “My lodging in Jerusalem is too cramped for me.” (Translation, http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/682520/jewish/English-Text.htm)

Why, however, did Hashem choose the path stated in our *parasha* and our initial verse, “... and I [Hashem] will dwell in their midst?” Stated somewhat differently, “Why did infinite G-d make His presence manifest to finite man?” We, of course, can never know the answer with certainty, since Hashem’s ways are ultimately inscrutable to man. Nonetheless, it appears to me that G-d did this as an act of total *chesed* (kindness), similar in kind to His actions in the following famous Talmudic passage:

Just as Hashem clothed the naked [in the case of Adam and Chava]... so, too, should you clothe the naked. Just as Hashem visited the sick [in the case of Avraham after his *brit milah*]...so, too, should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He comforted the mourners [in the case of Yitzhak after Avraham's passing]...so, too, should you comfort the mourners. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He buried the dead [in the case of Moshe *Rabbeinu*]...so, too, should you bury the dead. (*Talmud Bavli, Sotah 14a*)

Therefore, out of pure *chesed*, the singular attribute illustrated in our Talmudic passage, Hashem caused Himself to dwell in our midst. Moreover, although we can never comprehend His true greatness, although we can never behold His countenance, although we can never understand His essence, He nonetheless wanted us to feel the presence of His *Schechinah* in both the *Mishkan* and the two *Batei Mikdash*. May the time come soon and in our days when we will experience this once again, in Hashem's rebuilt *Beit Hamikdash*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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