



The Sacred Tent of the Cohen

Type of the famous temple that Solomon built in Jerusalem

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This tent, the worship center of the Israelites in the desert, concerns all of us.

They just escaped in the Exodus. The Israelites are free at last. They are no longer slaves, submitted to the oppression of space and to the visible gods of Egypt, the Pharaohs, the Nile and the numerous idols. Behind them is the darkness of their slavery, and before them lies the desert, empty and unknown. Suspended in this void, hopeless, they are called to serve the God who defined Himself as *Ehye*, the “I will be” (Exodus 3:14), the God who saved them and who “will be” with them.

Now, instead of building pyramids, expressions of the human attempt to reach heaven, they are called to build a tent, which will paradoxically be for them the visible sign of the invisible and omnipresent God—sign of His presence in spite of His absence, sign of His forgiveness in spite of their sins, and sign of hope in spite of their hopelessness.

1. Sign of Presence

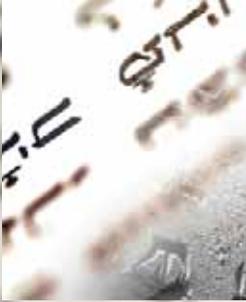
“Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Speak to the children of Israel . . . let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show you, that by the pattern of the tabernacle . . . just so you shall make it’ (Exodus 25:1, 8, 9). The tent is the place where God dwells. This function is already given in the very name that designates the tent, *mishkan*, “the Dwelling” (Exodus 25:9), or the *Mishkan YHWH*, “the dwelling of the Lord” (Leviticus 17:4).

The tent will become the favorite meeting place,

the rendezvous between God and His people. Another name of the sanctuary suggests precisely this function; it is called the “tabernacle of meeting” (Numbers 11:16; 12:4; Deuteronomy 31:14). Indeed, within the tent’s first compartment three objects are put which will again remind of this lesson of God’s presence: the lampstand, the showbread, and the altar of incense. The seven-branched lampstand, the *menorah* with its bright and permanent light (Exodus 25:31-40), reminded them of the light of the Torah which will help them walk and find their way in the darkness of history and in the struggles of their personal existence: “your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105). On the table the twelve loaves of bread¹ (Exodus 25:30), called “bread of the Presence” (*lehem Ha-panim*) or “bread of permanence” (*lehem Ha-tamid*), re-



mindful of the permanence of God’s presence. Next to them the cups of wine that accompanied the sacrifices (Numbers 28:7; Exodus 30:9) represented in biblical imagery the threat of judgment and wrath that was associated with the presence



of the Great God (Psalm 60:3; Jeremiah 25:15). As for the incense which was burned morning and evening, it was designed to maintain alive in the minds the awareness of the holiness of God's Presence. The priest could never enter the most holy place without surrounding himself with this cloud of incense (Leviticus 16:12, 13), sign of God's distance in spite of His close Presence. God is here, yet He is also there. God is near but He is also far (Jeremiah 23:23). The God who dwells with His People is also the Holy God who dwells in heaven; hence the other name of this tent, the *Miqdash*, "the sanctuary" (Exodus 25:8), or simply the Holy Place (*Ha-Qodesh*, Exodus 28:29).

A tent, paradoxically the visible sign of the invisible and omnipresent God.

This is precisely another lesson of this sacred tent: to teach about a heavenly reality. As the ancient rabbis taught, the earthly tent of the *mishkan* was to reflect the heavenly domain (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Ps. 713). This is given from the start. The tent and its components will have to be built according to a plan revealed by God. The structure of this tent will not be the mere expression of a human culture or a superstition. Moses will have to build it according to a pattern "shown on the mountain" (Exodus 26:30). There is reference here to another reality. For the God of Israel is the God of heaven—not only the God of a people, but also the God of the Universe, not only the God of existence, but also the real God who exists outside of Israel—a God who dwells elsewhere, in a space that is infinitely beyond our reach (Deuteronomy 26:15; Psalm 113:5).

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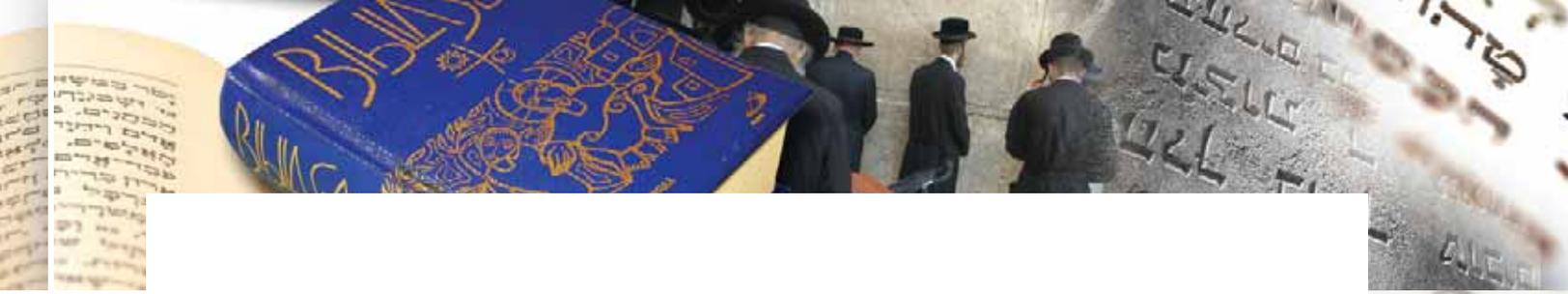
This evocation of the heavenly order is another function of the sanctuary. Beyond the veil, in the second compartment (the Most Holy place), there is only one object: the ark of the covenant that contains the law of God and on which stand two golden figures representing heavenly beings, "the cherubim" (Exodus 25:18-20). It is noteworthy that the Hebrew prophets referred to these figures in order to suggest the heavenly throne of God (Isaiah 6:1-3; Ezekiel 10; Daniel 7:9-10).

Thus the tent of the *cohen* stood in the desert as a sign of the impossible: it was a place where the heavenly and the earthly orders met. In the ancient cultures these two domains were infinitely remote and absolutely distinct from each other. In Ancient Near Eastern religions the gods of heaven never came down. They were always far off and impossible to reach. In fact, they were not even interested in coming down and making themselves known to humans. One of the lessons of this tent was to remind the people of Israel that their heavenly God was approachable.

2. Sign of Forgiveness

Now, it was not the tent *per se*, as an object, that made God approachable. The Levitical service teaches us that the mechanism that allowed the ancient Israelites to approach this powerful God was the sacrifices. The very word in Hebrew that is used for "sacrifice," *Haqriv*, accounts already for this process, since it also means "to make approachable." The only way that made God approachable

was the fact that through the sacrifice human iniquity was forgiven. This was not because the sacrifice had a major effect on God and obliged Him to respond, as the pagans of that time believed. In pagan gesture the move is upward. It is initiated by humans in order to trigger the act of God. It is a magic process. In the Israelite sacrifice on the other hand, the move is downward. It is initiated by God in order to reach humans and make peace with them. The sacrifice is not magic but suggests rather a prophetic process. Instead of being a human mechanism, it refers to an action on the part of God. In the pagan sacrifice it is the best of man that is offered, as in the offering of Cain (Genesis 4). In the Israelite sacrifice it is the best of God that is offered. The only way to reach God is by God's moving downwards. Any human attempt to move up to God will ultimately end in the confusion of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). Since God cannot be reached by humans, God had to come down; He had to limit Himself in order to communicate with humankind. The idea is bold, yet the Bible dared to mention it. God ran the



risk to lose Himself, to sacrifice Himself for the benefit of men and women. This is one of the lessons of the sacrifices that were associated with the Levitical tabernacle. All the Bible witnesses to this unbelievable love of God.

The first prophecy that is given in the heart of Adam's despair (Genesis 3:15) describes the ultimate salvation of humankind in terms of sacrifice. The seed, the *zera'*, which represents the Messiah, will wrestle with the serpent, which represents evil, and will eventually overcome the evil powers at the price of His life. He will crush the head of the serpent, yet in the process He will be hit in the heel. The same Hebrew word *shuf* describes the two acts, suggesting through this wordplay that they both belong to the same process: it is a sacrifice. Likewise the prophet Isaiah speaks about the Servant of the Lord, who is neither Israel nor the prophet, and who will offer Himself like the sacrificial lamb (Isaiah 53:7, 10) in order to save Israel ("my people," *'ammi*, verse 8) and "all of us" (verses 5, 6).

Also the prophet Daniel describes the future coming of the Meshiah who is identified with a sacrificial lamb who will be slaughtered in order to "make an end to sins," "make reconciliation," and "bring in everlasting righteousness" (Daniel 9:24-26).

The prophet Daniel goes so far as to predict a date for this sacrifice: "From the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem, until Messiah, Prince, seven weeks and sixty-two weeks . . . and after sixty-two weeks will be slaughtered Messiah" (Daniel 9:25-26). Knowing that the decree to rebuild and restore Jerusalem falls in 457 B.C.E. and that the prophet Daniel used the system 1 day = 1 year, the sacrifice is then supposed to take place in the year 31 C.E.²

In biblical context the sacrifices were not merely referring to a present situation. The perspective was essentially prophetic. When the Israelite offered a sacrifice he understood that he could approach God only because of this sacrifice that signifies the ultimate divine move toward humankind. The sacred tent in the desert was thus the recipient of a prophecy that was fulfilled in

31 C.E. in the person of the Messiah Yeshua of Nazareth. And many Jews, by thousands and hundred thousands, recognized it at that time.

3. Sign of Hope

The Israelite who offered his or her sacrifice left reassured. God had forgiven him or her. The Israelite could pursue his work further and give to his or her life a new start. Yet the problem was not totally resolved. Death, evil, and iniquity were still threatening. Indeed it is not enough to know that "God loves us" or that He is ready to make His sacrifice, if He leaves us in the same mud as before. Otherwise salvation would be reduced to a mere psychological phenomenon, a sentimental, a mystical, or an existential experience.

God ran the risk to lose Himself.

The teaching of the sanctuary aims far beyond the present. It also contains a lesson about hope. It tells us that one day in the future all the problems will be resolved; death and sin will be radically eliminated and a new creation will take place.

This is why biblical and Jewish tradition have associated the two events of Creation and the building of the sanctuary. Every Sabbath religious Jews are supposed to remember this association, since on this day they celebrate Creation by refraining from doing precisely the 39 works (*malakbah*) of the building of the sanctuary (*Shab 7,2*). In the Bible both the story of creation and that of the sanctuary are developed in seven steps, and both end with the same technical conclusion, "finished the work" (Genesis 2:1; Exodus 40:33; see also 1 Kings 7:40, 51). This connection is also attested in the Psalms: "He built His sanctuary like the heights, like the earth which He has founded forever" (Psalm 78:69; compare Psalm 150:1; Isaiah 40:21, 22). In ancient rabbinic midrashim it was emphasized over and over again that the construction of the tabernacle corresponded to the order of the world's creation (*Exodus Rabbah 35:6; 34:2; Numbers Rabbah 12:13*).

In building the sanctuary the Israelite remembered the miracle of Creation. The hope that is registered in the lessons of the sanctuary goes beyond the simple daily experience; it is also an absolute and cosmic response in view of the "new



heaven” and “new earth.”

God’s forgiveness was not just an experience of the present associated with the ordinary life on this earth. In addition to the daily sacrifices, the sanctuary provided a yearly ceremony that had a cosmic scope:

Kippur. In the course of the year the blood of the sacrifices was carried to the Holy Place (the first compartment of the sanctuary) and remained there until *Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. Then, and only then, the great *Cohen* entered the Most Holy Place (the second compartment of the sanctuary). The blood was then sprinkled on the lid of the ark where were preserved the two tables of the Law (Deuteronomy 10:5; Exodus 26:33). All the sins were then transferred to the goat *Azazel* (personification of evil) which was driven out into the desert.

All the sins that were symbolically compressed in the tent were then reduced to nothing and disappeared in the wilderness. The sanctuary was then declare “cleansed” (Leviticus 16:17). The ceremony has universal overtones. The text that reports the institution of *Kippur* repeats the refrain phrase “all the iniquities” (Leviticus 16:22, 30, 34).

It is noteworthy that the prophet Daniel, who interpreted the daily sacrifice as a reference to the event of the slaughter of the Messiah (Daniel 9:26), has also read this Levitical ceremony of *Kippur* as a reference to the heavenly judgment that will mark the end of human history. “For two thousand three hundred days; then the sanctuary shall be cleansed” (Daniel 8:14). The two events, the slaughter of the Messiah (Daniel 9) and the cleansing of the sanctuary, the heavenly *Kippur* (Daniel 8), are put in the same perspective. A number of clues from chapters 8 and 9 suggest that the two prophecies are connected. The same key phrase *haben hamareh*, “understand the vision,” is used in both prophecies, marking the beginning of the vision (Daniel 8:16) and its conclusion (Daniel 9:23). Also the period of the seventy weeks is in 9:24 said to be “cut off” (*hthk*), implying the longer period of 2300 evenings and mornings from which it was “cut off,”

Judgement is essentially atonement.

or subtracted. The two prophetic visions thus start at the same time, that is, the decree of the reconstruction of Jerusalem, in 457 B.C.E. The first prophetic period lasts to 31 C.E. (457 + 70 weeks of years), the second ends in 1843/1844 C.E. (457 B.C. + 2300 days=years). In the bibli-

cal text the two prophecies have been fulfilled in history. The first prophecy has been confirmed by the coming of Yeshua, the Messiah, the only Jewish Messiah indeed who affected the course of history and brought the testimony of the God of Israel to the extremities of the world. The second prophecy has been confirmed in the intense movement of hope that characterized the period of 1843-1844, not only among many Christians throughout the world, but also among Jews; in the movement of Chabad and the Yemenite Jews this time was retained as a special time of intense expectations of the coming of the Messiah. The two events are related but they hold two different and complementary functions. Just as the Day of Atonement complements the “daily sacrifice,” so the heavenly judgment which started in 1844 complements the drama perpetrated in 31.

The event of judgment is then not expected in fear and anguish or as a terrible sentence, but as the ultimate point of hope. Indeed, judgment is essentially atonement rather than condemnation and belongs to the salvation process. This is implicitly indicated in the mention of the “open books” (Daniel 7:10) which are always associated in the Bible with saved people (Exodus 32:32; Psalm 56:8; 69:28; 139:16; Malachi 3:16; Daniel 7:10; 12:1-3). This is explicitly said by Daniel himself: “Judgment was made in favor of the saints” (Daniel 7:22).

The presence of God in the midst of His people could only be embarrassing and difficult. The sacred tent of Sinai did not just provide the moments and the space for worship. It did not just give a sense of God’s presence. It also hinted at another time and another space when and where God’s Presence will finally be experienced in actual reality.

¹They were probably unleavened loaves. See Exodus 29:2; Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities* VI.6; X.17.

²See Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Daniel* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 2000), 135-136.