YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Mikdash**

**Lecture 30: The History of the resting**

**of the *Shekhina* (part XiV)**

**THe *Mishkan* As a new form of Divine service (as opposed to an altar (*Mizbe'ach*)or Pillar (*Matzeva*)**

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From the time of the creation of the world and until the revelation at Mount Sinai, the Divine service was performed at altars and pillars. An explicit expression of this form of service is mentioned in connection with Moshe Rabbenu at the foot of Mount Sinai:

And Moshe wrote all the words of the Lord, and rose up early in the morning, and built an altar under the hill, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. (*Shemot* 24:4)

Already in the next chapter, God commands Moshe to build the *Mishkan*: "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" (*Shemot* 25:8).

What is the essential difference between service performed at an altar or pillar and service conducted in the *Mishkan?* Why was it necessary to institute this change, and why specifically at this time?

It is also possible to formulate this question on the exegetical plane. Immediately following the revelation at Mount Sinai, God commands the building of an altar in its various forms – "An altar of earth you shall make to Me… And if you will make Me an altar of stone…" (*Shemot* 20:20-21), and five chapters later He commands the building of the *Mishkan*, which includes an altar of *shittim* wood (chapter 27). What is the relationship between these two passages, and what is the significance of the transition from the commandment regarding an altar (which was issued **after** the revelation at Mount Sinai!) to the commandment concerning the *Mishkan*?[[1]](#footnote-1)

### the difference between an altar or Pillar and the *Mishkan*

### the initiative

Any person can erect an altar or pillar on his own initiative,[[2]](#footnote-2) whereas the *Mishkan* could only be constructed on God's initiative and explicit command.

### Individual service as opposed to communal service

Altars and pillars were generally constructed by individuals and on behalf of individuals,[[3]](#footnote-3) whereas the *Mishkan* was built by the community and on behalf of the community.

### The nature of the service

Altars are meant for the offering of sacrifices.[[4]](#footnote-4) Sacrifices are not mentioned in connection with pillars, but we do find libations in that context (see *Bereishit* 28:18; 35:14). In the *Mishkan* there was a wider variety of forms of service: prostration, the festival pilgrimages, appearing before God, lighting the *menorah*, burning incense, a fixed sacrificial order (the daily offering and the additional offerings of Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh, and the festivals), first-fruit, firstborn animals, *hakhel*, taking the four species on Sukkot and encircling the altar, and the like.

This variety is clearly influenced by the previous distinction: In a private system, the variety of actions is limited, whereas in a public system, there is room for greater diversity, including large public assemblies (e.g., pilgrimages on the festivals, or the *mitzvah* of *hakhel* at the beginning of the eighth year of the sabbatical cycle). It is also clear that this variety is influenced by the first difference: The *Mishkan* is part of a wider system of *mitzvot* and commands, and requires fixed and frequent activities that have no parallel in the case of altars or pillars.

### Natural service as opposed to Human action

The service performed at an altar or a pillar is natural service. This is especially evident in the case of an earthen altar,[[5]](#footnote-5) which gives expression to the elevation, as it were, of the earth toward God (see R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, at length, in his commentary to *Bereishit* 8:20). An altar stands by itself, and is much simpler than the complicated and splendid totality of the *Mikdash*. Furthermore, as opposed to the *Mikdash*, which is essentially a closed structure, an altar is built in an open area, under the sky. In this respect, the altar in the Temple courtyard differs from the other altars. Even though it, too, is built in an open area, it relates to the structure of the *Mikdash* with respect to its location and it is included in the sacred zones that the structure defines.

As for service performed at a pillar, it may be characterized as Divine service by way of a sanctification of nature. As R. Samson Raphael Hirsch writes (in his commentary to *Bereishit* 33:20):

A *matzeva*, the rock or single stone offered by nature, corresponds to the idea of a memorial of what God has done for us… Corresponding to these ideas, the *matzeva* was preferably meant for libations, for acknowledging the gifts of blessing as coming from God…[[6]](#footnote-6)

We see, then, that, in certain senses, an earthen altar and a pillar express the service of God through nature, by elevating nature to God.

The structure of the *Mishkan*, on the other hand, represents human activity at its height: the design and execution of a complex structure out of a wide variety of materials in a manner that fits in with the circumstances of the time and place. What is needed for this task is "the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to contrive works of art, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of timber, to work in all manner of workmanship" (*Shemot* 31:3-5); while the wisdom comes from God, the doing is man's.

### Anywhere or in one place

An altar or a pillar can be built anywhere, there being no restrictions as to location or number. For example, a person can, at one and the same time, erect one altar in his house, another at his workplace, and another at some site where something important happened to him, or the like.

The *Mishkan*, on the other hand, was erected in a particular place, and at any given time it was found only there. While it is true that in the wilderness and in Israel's early years in their land, the *Mishkan* wandered between various stations, it was always found in one place at any given time, which served as the central site of the nation's Divine service during that period (or the only such site, during the times when *bamot* were forbidden; see *Zevachim* 14:4-8), until the site chosen by God was found in Jerusalem and the Divine service was established there forevermore.

Establishing a particular location (even if temporary) to erect a structure in which to serve God redefines the zones within the structure (the courtyard, the Holy, and the Holy of Holies) and those surrounding it (the camp of the *Shekhina*, the camp of the Levites, and the camp of the Israelites), and dictates obligations and prohibitions which stem from the fact that the structure is standing in its place. This phenomenon does not exist at all with respect to an altar or a pillar.

### the identity of those performing the service

There is no explicit definition in the Torah of those eligible to serve at an altar or pillar. According to *Chazal* (*Zevachim* 14:4), the service was performed by the firstborns; that is to say, the firstborn of each family represented his entire family. In any event, the service could be performed in every house, and by representatives of each and every house.

The entire tribe of Levi was chosen to serve in the *Mishkan*, and Aharon and his descendants were sanctified to serve as priests.[[7]](#footnote-7) From that time on, the Divine service was limited to the members of a particular tribe chosen for that purpose, and all the others were no longer fit to fill that function. What is more, even within the tribe of Levi itself, there were gradations that dictated diverse obligations and prohibitions to each group. All this did not apply to an altar or pillar.

### Human service and the resting of the *SHekhina*

The primary purpose of an altar and pillar was to serve as a means for man's service of God, while the *Mishkan* also served (and perhaps primarily served) as the site of the resting of the *Shekhina* - "And let them make Me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them" (*Shemot* 25:8). The presence of the *Shekhina* expresses itself in the structure of the *Mishkan*, which is designed like a house. In the innermost chamber, the Holy of Holies, the *Shekhina* rests on the ark, the *kaporet* and the *keruvim*; in the outer chamber, the Holy, we find the house's furnishings – the *menora* and the table; and the burnt offering altar, which constitutes only one component in the system, stands outside.[[8]](#footnote-8) Indeed, in the accounts of the consecration of the *Mishkan* we find detailed and festive descriptions of the resting of the *Shekhina* both in the *Mishkan* and on the altar found in the courtyard, but we do not find a revelation of God on the altars and pillars that were built prior to the revelation at Mount Sinai.

This difference may be seen as the basis for many of the differences that have been discussed thus far.[[9]](#footnote-9)

* Man can serve God on his own initiative wherever he wants, but he cannot establish on his own whether, when, and how to prepare a domicile for Him; this can only be initiated by God Himself.
* Man can turn to God and serve Him anywhere, but the *Shekhina* can only rest in a defined place.
* An altar and a pillar are modes of worship available to the individual, and through which he can turn to God. Communal worship, on the other hand, stems from the resting of the *Shekhina* in the community's midst.
* An altar and a pillar are instruments for serving God, and therefore any person can serve God through them. In the *Mikdash*, the site of the resting of God's *Shekhina*, the service is not open to everyone, but only to those designated by God for that purpose - just as in the house of a human king, only those properly designated and trained can minister to the monarch.
* The varied character of the Temple service in great measure reflects the fact that the *Mikdash* is the site of the resting of the *Shekhina*. Thus, for example, the prostration in the *Mikdash*, the pilgrimages undertaken to it on the festivals, and appearing therein before God are all direct expressions of the resting of the *Shekhina* in the *Mikdash*. Lighting the *menora*, burning the incense, arranging the shewbread, and even the fixed sacrificial order are all part of the process of fashioning the *Mikdash* like a house. The "agricultural" *mitzvot* that are fulfilled in the *Mikdash* (e.g., the *omer* sacrifice, the *shetei ha-lechem*, and the first-fruit) reflect the distance created between the place where man serves God, the site of the resting of the *Shekhina*, and the place where man works his fields (previously, a person could simply build an altar in his field).

In short, Divine service in the *Mikdash* differs from Divine service at an altar or pillar in that it is service of God **in His house.**

### the walls of the house – separating between Israel and the nations

In a previous lecture (lecture no. 19 in last year's series), we brought R. Kook's explanation (*Iggerot Ha-Ra'aya* III, letter 746, p. 10) of the fact that pillars, which were permitted during the patriarchal period, were later forbidden. I wish to cite again part of his comment:

It is fitting to consider the distinction between a center around which people gather for worship which fell into disrepute and a structure in which people gather for service which remained in favor…

That is to say: At first when Avraham began to call upon the name of God, his calling did not involve specific modes of worship and detailed commandments. He simply **directed the hearts of mankind toward the Lord, God of the world, Creator of heaven and earth. Such a form [of worship] allows of no distinction between one people and another. All of mankind can assemble together to serve God, and this is the implication of a pillar: a central point of sanctity, around which all people without distinction gather for worship.**

But such a general approach was purely a transitional stage. The supreme aim was the emergence in the world of the specific mode of worship followed by the chosen people, Israel, to which level not all mankind could equally attain. When Yaakov foresaw the specific mode of worship that was destined to emerge from his descendants, he said that "this stone which I have set as a pillar" will not be a center of generalized free worship, but "a house of God," **a special place of worship bounded by walls into which only the worthy can enter.** None of the peoples have as yet any concept of the values of this exclusive organized ritual, the minutiae of the Torah and its precepts which distinguish Israel in all their actions…

In time to come, when all mankind will see what all these rites and judgments, minutiae and fundamental laws have done… all shall say: Henceforth we realize that the generalized approach to God, the concept of disembodied ("naked") faith which we thought would satisfy all the spiritual functions, is not enough for us. But we need to scale the mountain of the Lord which summons to the sacred totality of faith and intimate knowledge of Him, in order to enter the inner sanctum – "the house of the everlasting God."

A pillar reflects the idea of naked faith, and all may assemble around it, without distinction and without any particular restrictions or commandments. A house, on the other hand, has boundaries and precise definitions – the laws and *mitzvot* of the Torah – regarding the relationship between man and God. The boundaries of the house, its walls, distinguish between Israel and the nations, between those who are inside and those who have not yet reached the level that allows them to enter.

### Summary

Altars and pillars are generally designated for individuals; through them, man expresses his desire to worship God, and it is therefore he who determines their location and time, the nature of the service, and the identity of those who serve.

The *Mishkan* was built in a particular place, time, and manner, at God's command, and it was part of a wider and more comprehensive system of commandments. It was built by and for the people of Israel, and therefore it has a different purpose and meaning. The fact that it is defined as God's house dictates obligations and limitations regarding the sanctity of the place, and the service for which one particular tribe was selected.

Altars and pillars are readily available, simple, and designed for the common folk. Anyone can offer a sacrifice there if he so desires. The *Mishkan* creates a certain distance between the common man and the sanctified structure, and even inside there are different levels, a chamber inside a chamber. On the other hand, the deeper one enters into the *Mishkan*, the more tangible the presence of God.[[10]](#footnote-10)

### Why shift from Altars/Pillars to the *Mishkan*?

### From Individual service to communal service

We have already counted among the more striking characteristics of this change the transition from individual service to communal service and from plain service of God to service of God in His house, in the place where His *Shekhina* rests. These differences do not necessarily obligate a change; as may be recalled (see lecture no. 23 in last year's series), the Seforno saw the "popular" service on the altar as the ideal way of bringing God's *Shekhina* to rest on the entire people of Israel (and it stands to reason that this itself is part of his disagreement with the rest of the *Rishonim*).[[11]](#footnote-11)

In addition to this, we can count two other important reasons for the shift to the *Mishkan*, both of which have been discussed in previous lectures (and therefore we shall deal with them here in brief): the revelation at Mount Sinai and the sin involving the golden calf.[[12]](#footnote-12)

### The revelation at Mount SInai

The ten plagues, the exodus from Egypt, the splitting of the sea, the manna and the quails, causing water to flow from the rock, and the war with Amalek – all these involved stupendous miracles, in which God's hand and direct providence over Israel became clearly manifest. But the unique phenomenon that took place on Mount Sinai – the public one-time revelation of God before an entire people and His declaration of the Ten Commandments to them – changed the relationship between God and Israel in an essential way.

We already discussed at length (in lectures no. 20 and 22 in last year's series) the idea of the *Mishkan* as a continuation of the revelation at Mount Sinai, and here I wish to briefly summarize the various aspects of this notion.

### The revelation of the kingdom of God in the *Mishkan –* A continuation of the acceptance of God's kingdom at Mount Sinai

And when Israel accepted the kingdom of heaven with joy, saying, "All that the Lord has said will we do, and obey" (*Shemot* 24:7), the Holy One, blessed be He, immediately said to Moshe, "Speak to the children of Israel that they bring Me an offering" (ibid. 25:5). (*Tanna de-Bei Eliyahu*, *Eliyahu Rabba*, *parasha* 17)

At the revelation at Mount Sinai, the people of Israel joyously accepted God's kingship, and in order to allow that kingship to continue to manifest itself in the world, the *Mishkan* was built.[[13]](#footnote-13) The *Mishkan* fills this role, as opposed to an altar or pillar that reveal God's kingdom in a much more restricted manner.

### the COntinuation of the connection created between GOd and the people of Israel through the giving of the TOrah

"That they bring (lit., 'take') Me an offering" (*Shemot* 25:2) – I gave you my Torah; take Me as well. And from where do we say that the word "*li*" is used in the sense of *"oti*?" As it is stated: "But me (*li*), even me your servant" (I *Melakhim* 1:26). (*Torah Sheleima*, *Shemot* 25:2, no. 12, in the name of *Lekach Tov*)

It can be compared to the only daughter of a king whom another king married. When he wished to return to his country and take his wife with him, he [the father] said to him: "My daughter, whose hand I have given you, is my only child. I cannot part with her, neither can I say to you, 'Do not take her,' for she is now your wife. This favor, however, I would request of you: wherever you go to live, have a chamber ready for me that I may dwell with you, for I cannot leave my daughter." Thus, God said to Israel: "I have given you a Torah from which I cannot part, and I also cannot tell you not to take it; but this I would request: **wherever you go make Me a house wherein I may sojourn**." As it says: "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" (*Shemot* 25:8). (*Shemot Rabba* 33:1)

We have already discussed in the past (lecture no. 2 in last year's series) the central role that the Torah played in the *Mikdash*. We see from these *midrashim* (and other sources) that the connection between the *Mikdash* and the Torah began with the very command to build the *Mishkan*, which made it possible for God to dwell among the people of Israel and perpetuate the unmediated encounter between Him and Israel through the Torah.

### The continuation of the tangible closeness between GOd and the people of Israel

M.D. Cassuto writes as follows (in his commentary to *Shemot*, p. 221):

The people of Israel, after having merited the revelation of God on Mount Sinai, arose to depart from there and move away from the site of the revelation. While they had encamped in that place, they felt the closeness of God; when they departed, it appeared to them that everything would fall apart, were there not a tangible symbol of God's presence among them. The *Mishkan* was meant to serve as such a symbol… The connection between Israel and the *Mishkan* is a constant continuation of the connection created at Mount Sinai between the people and their God. The people of Israel, divided into their tribes at each and every encampment, could, from every direction, see the *Mishkan* standing in the middle of the camp. The fact that the *Mishkan* stood before their eyes proved to them that just as the Glory of God rested on Mount Sinai, so, too, it rests among them in all the places of their wanderings in the wilderness. This is what Scripture means when it says: "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" (*Shemot* 25:8).

The tangible closeness between Israel and God that came into being at Mount Sinai required continuation. This need was filled by the *Mishkan*, where God dwells in the midst of the camp of Israel, and thus is with them wherever they go.

### THe sin of the golden calf

The connection between the command to build the *Mishkan* and the sin of the golden calf was discussed at length in lecture no. 23 in last year's series. Let us briefly summarize some of the points raised there.

### Preparing the remedy before the injury

"And let them make Me a sanctuary" (*Shemot* 25:8) – The Holy One, blessed be He, acted benevolently toward them and prepared the remedy before the injury and commanded Moshe about building the *Mishkan* and all of its vessels in order to atone for the incident involving the golden calf. Let "and let them make Me a sanctuary" come and atone for "Rise up, make us gods" (ibid. 32:1). (*Midrash Lekach Tov*, *Ki-Tisa* 105; cited in *Torah Sheleima*, *Teruma*, no. 72)

That is to say, the building of the *Mishkan* was meant to help Israel deal with the sin of the golden calf, in the sense of preparing a remedy even before the injury.

### Renewed closeness in the aftermath of the sin

Another explanation: "That they bring Me an offering" (*Shemot* 25:2). This is what is meant by the verse which states: "I sleep, but my heart wakes" (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:2). The people of Israel said: … I sleep because of the incident of the golden calf [out of despair], but my heart wakes and the Holy One, blessed be He, knocks. This is, "That they bring Me an offering." "Open to Me, My sister, My love" (ibid.). Until when shall I walk about without a house?… Rather, make Me a sanctuary, so that I not be outside. (*Shemot Rabba* 33, 3).

This *midrash* presents the building of the *Mishkan* as a step taken by God toward Israel in the aftermath of the sin involving the golden calf in order to dispel their despair and give practical expression to His remaining close to them despite the sin.

### Acquiescence to the human need for tangible modes of worship

"And you shall make an altar of shittim wood" (*Shemot* 27:1). The entire matter of the *menora*, the table, the altar, the boards, the tent, the curtains and all the vessels of the *Mishkan –* for what? Israel said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the universe, the kings of the nations have a tent, a table, a *menora*, and an incense burner. And this is part of the royal order, for every king needs them. And you our King, our Redeemer, our Deliverer – shouldn't you have this royal order, so that all the people in the world will know that you are the king? He said to them: My sons, those [kings of] flesh and blood need all that, but not I, because before Me there is no eating, and no drinking, and I do not need a light…. If so, do what you wish, but do it as I command you. (*Midrash Agada*, ed. Buber, *Shemot* 27:1)

The sin involving the golden calf demonstrated that the people of Israel were unable to make do with Divine service performed solely in the mind and in the heart, but rather they needed a tangible means of service. According to this *midrash*, the *Mishkan* is God's answer to this need, and constitutes an important repair of the sin.

### Summary

It is possible to point to three main reasons for the transition at this point from Divine service performed at an altar or pillar to Divine service performed in the *Mishkan*:

1. The transition from the worship of individuals to the worship of an entire community.
2. A continuation of the revelation at Mount Sinai: as an expression and revelation of God's kingdom in this world, as a continuation of the connection between God and Israel that had been established by way of the Torah, and as a continuation of the tangible connection between them.
3. A repair of the sin involving the golden calf: as an answer to the need for a tangible expression of God's presence and as an expression of God's closeness in the aftermath of the sin and the despair that came in its wake, and also as a preparation of the remedy before the injury.

These three factors contributed in different ways to the character of the *Mishkan.* The process of transforming the people of Israel from an aggregation of individuals into a community reached its spiritual and religious climax at the one-time direct revelation of God to the entire people at Mount Sinai. This revelation built a new story of connection between God and Israel, in which the mutual closeness and obligation were at a level entirely different from anything that preceded it. The *Mishkan* served as the means for continuing in the midst of the camp of Israel – which now had turned into a nation, defined by its connection to God – the presence and intimacy of God that had been revealed at Mount Sinai, something that an altar or pillar would have been unable to do. As a repair of the sin involving the golden calf, the transition from altar to *Mishkan* highlights the tangible expression given to God's presence in the midst of Israel by way of a structure built in the manner of a real domicile and by way of worship performed with concrete rites and ceremonies.

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We have examined the differences between worship at an altar or pillar and worship in the *Mishkan*, and we have tried to account for the transition from the former to the latter. In the next lecture, we will examine this issue from an exegetical perspective, and we will try to understand the relationship between the command to build the altar in *Parashat Yitro* and the command regarding the *Mishkan* in *Parashot Teruma* and *Tetzave.*

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. We shall deal with this exegetical issue in the next lecture. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In the next lecture, we will deal with the question of whether the verse "An altar of earth you shall make to Me" (*Shemot* 20:20) is a command, or perhaps a description of what will happen in the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. While it is true that the altars built by the patriarchs served to draw people close to the service of God (see lecture no. 14 in last year's series), they were nevertheless regional centers built by individuals. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We also find altars in Scripture that were not used for the offering of sacrifices. Regarding almost every altar built by one of the patriarchs (to the exclusion of the altar built by Avraham at the *Akeida*), there is no mention of any sacrifice. They appear to have served as a center for calling out in the name of God and for drawing people under the wings of the *Shekhina*. We also find an altar that served as testimony – the altar built by the tribes of Reuven and Gad and half the tribe of Menashe on the banks of the Jordan river (*Yehoshua* 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The human act is more evident in the building of a stone altar, and there is room to discuss the extent to which such an altar expresses the elevation of the earth from its natural state toward God. An altar of stone might express more fixed and stable circumstances, as the Ibn Ezra writes in his commentary to *Shemot* 20:21: "'And if you will make Me an altar of stone' – as if to say: Make now an altar of earth, and if you merit to enter the land, then you shall build an altar of stone." [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In the continuation of his comment (cited in lecture no. 19 in last year's series), R. Hirsch expands on the difference between a pillar and an altar and on why pillars that were viewed favorably during the days of the patriarchs were forbidden to their descendants. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Regarding the disagreement between Rashi and the Ramban concerning the chronology of the selection of the tribe of Levi and the family of priests, see lecture no. 24 in last year's series. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. We expanded further on the structure of the *Mishkan* as a house in lecture no 23 of last year's series (section 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. My thanks to the editor of this series, R. Boaz Kalush, who sharpened this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Israel Ariel expanded on this point in his article, "*Ha-Yofi Hu Ketze Karchon*," *Makor Rishon* (3 Adar 5766, 3.3.2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In one of the upcoming lectures, we will expand upon the significance of the Seforno's approach for understanding the Divine service and the resting of the *Shekhina* from the time of the revelation at Mount Sinai and on. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Those who see the *Mishkan* as *le-khatchila* draw a direct connection between it and the revelation at Mount Sinai, whereas those who see it as *be-di'eved* connect the command to build the *Mishkan* to the sin of the golden calf (regarding the issue of *le-khatchila* or *be-di'eved*, see lectures nos. 22-24 in last year's series). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In lecture no. 21 in last year's series, we saw that the people of Israel first recognized the kingdom of God in the Song of the Sea and, indeed, there we also find the first mention of a *Mikdash.* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)