

## The Structure of the Mishkan

By Rav Meir Spiegelman

Parashiot containing many details are often difficult to understand, in the sense that one "can't see the forest for trees." The parashiot that discuss the Mishkan fall squarely within this category. This week's parasha introduces a series of parashiot dealing with the Mishkan in minute detail, and still – or perhaps for that very reason – it is difficult to understand why this detailed description is significant and why it is repeated several times. This problem is particularly acute with regard to the construction of the Mishkan itself, since these laws are not applicable to future generations. In this shiur, I shall attempt to shed light on the significance of some of these details. However, instead of addressing the vessels and their material components, I will focus this week on the general structure of the Mishkan.

### "AS YOU WERE SHOWN UPON THE MOUNTAIN"

It is generally accepted that Moshe was shown a vision of the menorah while atop Mount Sinai, since it was complicated to build. This requires some explanation: after all, we are not told that Moshe saw a vision of the priestly garments – which are also complicated to make. (For example, Rashi comments that the form of the "efod" is impossible to understand from the text; Moshe was forced to rely on his sense of what its exact form should be.) In addition, the difficulty concerning the menorah seems to be not how it should look, but rather the practical question of how to fashion a menorah, of such complicated design, out of a single slab of gold. How could a vision of the finished menorah contribute to solving this practical problem?

Indeed, upon examining the verses, we note that Moshe was shown the entire Mishkan while he was on Mount Sinai, not only the menorah. Following the definition of the donation to be given by Bnei Yisrael, the Torah emphasizes that the Mishkan must be constructed AS MOSHE WILL SEE IT WHILE ATOP THE MOUNTAIN (25:9). This emphasis is repeated several times: after the command to build the menorah, then again as a general command applying to all the vessels, as well as after the command to fashion the boards, and again following the verses describing the sacrificial altar. We may say that, following the assertion that Moshe saw a vision of all of the Mishkan, separate emphasis is given to each part of it, and to the fact that he also saw these parts separately.

These assertions serve to divide the Mishkan into three parts: the vessels, the Mishkan itself, and the sacrificial altar. This division is logical, for the three parts are completely different from one another and it makes sense to draw a distinction

between them. But at the same time the division raises a dual difficulty. Firstly, it is not clear why the parokhet (curtain between the Holy and the Holy of Holies) is mentioned separately from the curtains of the Mishkan, for the text would seem to suggest that the parokhet represents part of these coverings. In addition, the text implies that Moshe did not see the parokhet and the screen for the entrance to the Mishkan while he was upon the mountain. We must obviously ask, then, why these elements suffer this type of "discrimination." A similar question may be raised concerning the courtyard and the priestly garments, which are likewise not mentioned anywhere as having been shown to Moshe.

I have noted in the past [1] that the Mishkan represents a permanent continuation of the Revelation at Sinai. The command to build the Mishkan was given after Bnei Yisrael expressed their readiness to hear God's word ("we shall do and we shall hear"), and within the Mishkan there is a continuous "giving of the Torah" as it took place at Mount Sinai. Therefore we must understand that the Torah emphasizes the fact that Moshe saw a vision of the Mishkan while atop the mountain not only to show that he had help in the construction of some parts of the Mishkan, but rather – more importantly – to highlight the connection between the Mishkan and Sinai. The Mishkan is the continuation of Sinai because Moshe envisioned it already when he was there, and was commanded there concerning its various laws.

### THE MISHKAN AND THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Just as the Mishkan represents a continuation of Sinai, it also represents a continuation of the Garden of Eden. Just as man was forbidden in Eden to eat flesh, so no element of the Mishkan is made from an animal. The vessels are made either of gold, or of wood that is coated with gold. The curtains of the Mishkan, which are on a lower level of sanctity than the vessels, are made of cotton or flax, and here again no animal life is taken for their construction. The coloring of the curtains is of animal origin, but the color itself is not a tangible entity. Within the Mishkan itself there were never any animal sacrifices, except for a situation where the entire nation, or the Kohen Gadol, sinned – in which case an animal sin offering is brought, since the Mishkan itself is defiled through such sins and thereby loses some of its holiness. Even the goatskin coverings which are part of the Mishkan, as will be explained below, are not made from actual goat skins but rather – apparently - from goat hair. In the list of donations, the Torah makes no mention of goat skins – even though "tachash" skins and reddened ram skins appear.

God places keruvim at the entrance to the Garden of Eden. "Keruvim" is a word that appears rarely in the Torah; it is mentioned only in connection with the Garden of Eden and the Mishkan. This parallel signifies that that keruvim guarding the way to the Tree of Life also guard the Mishkan. However, we note a progression in the location of the keruvim in the Mishkan: their presence becomes increasingly powerful as we draw

closer to God's abode. Upon the Ark itself there are real keruvim, which in fact are part of the Ark. Upon the parokhet separating the Kodesh from the Kodesh Ha-kodashim, too, there are keruvim – but these are merely woven into the fabric, rather than standing alone. The Torah teaches that the keruvim are to be artistic creations (ma'aseh choshev), but this expression is given no further explanation. Only later on are we told that Betzalel cut golden threads in order to interweave them together with the woolen threads, and this procedure is defined there as "artistic creation." From this we may deduce that a mixture of threads is defined as artistic creation. Hence, regarding the keruvim, too, we may conclude that they were interwoven in the fabric, and that this is the intention behind the requirement that they be "artistic creations."

The screen at the entrance, on the other hand, is described in the text as "embroidery work" (ma'aseh rokem). The Sages teach that these keruvim were embroidered upon it. This means that there was a background fabric upon which something else is then embroidered. This is fundamentally different from interweaving: the latter is similar to a knitted kippah, where the pattern forms part of the fabric of the article, whereas embroidery means something else that is sewn onto the fabric.

In other words, when we are in the courtyard, approaching the Kodesh, the keruvim are only embroidered. When we enter the Mishkan and reach the parokhet, they already represent part of the fabric itself, rather than being an external addition. And as we enter further inwards, the keruvim become "real" keruvim, fashioned out of gold.

#### CURTAINS OF THE MISHKAN, GOAT-HAIR CURTAINS AND THE PAROKHET

We may even detect a difference in level between the curtains of the Mishkan and the parokhet. The curtains, we are told, are made of "twined linen with blue and purple and scarlet", while the parokhet is made of the same threads but in opposite order: "blue and purple and scarlet and twined linen." This difference is no coincidence; in the description of the actual fashioning of the curtains, exactly the same difference is repeated. There is another difference between the parokhet and the curtains of the Mishkan: concerning the curtains, only the keruvim are to be made of "artistic work," whereas the entire parokhet itself (and not only the keruvim upon it) is to be "artistic work."

These differences may be explained in several ways. One possible explanation is that the curtains of the Mishkan are composed of a twined linen base, while the keruvim woven into the fabric are of blue, purple and scarlet. The parokhet, on the other hand, has the blue, purple and scarlet threads as its base, while the keruvim are woven into it with twined linen thread. Obviously, blue thread is more highly prized than twined linen, for the blue thread is found only in the Mishkan itself, while in the courtyard there is only twined linen with no blue.[2] We may therefore regard the differences as reflecting differences in status: the most important thing about the curtains of the Mishkan is the keruvim, and therefore they are made of blue thread, while the base fabric is twined linen. The most important thing about the parokhet is the parokhet itself,

which is made of blue thread, while the keruvim are of lesser importance and are therefore made of twined linen. As I shall explain below, the main task of the parokhet is to divide the two areas, and therefore the keruvim here are of lesser significance.

The Torah emphasizes that the parokhet must lie beneath the clasps of the Mishkan. The curtains are made of two segments, the width of each of which is twenty cubits, and these two parts are joined with clasps. Since the length of the Mishkan is only thirty cubits, we may deduce that one curtain stretches from the entrance of the Mishkan over twenty cubits to the clasps, while the other curtain covers ten cubits, with the additional ten cubits to cover the boards (as shall be explained below). The clasps, then, divide the Mishkan into two unequal parts: there is the Kodesh, twenty cubits long, and the Kodesh Ha-kodashim, which is ten cubits long. The parokhet hangs down, separating these two areas.

However, we must remember that there were also other clasps in the Mishkan: in the goat-hair curtains. These clasps were not facing the bottom clasps. The goat-hair curtains were made of two curtains. The length of each was thirty cubits. The width of one curtain was twenty cubits, while the other was 24 cubits long (one curtain was comprised of five segments while the other curtain comprised six). Thus, if the two curtains were joined, a single curtain would be obtained with a length of forty-four cubits and a width of thirty. The Torah does not state explicitly whether the greater half was placed on the side of the entrance, or whether it was rather the smaller half that lay on the eastern side. However, from the fact that the Torah establishes that the sixth curtain (segment) should be folded over to face the Ohel, we may conclude that the larger curtain was at the side of the entrance, for only this curtain contained six segments.

The Torah stipulates, then, that the sixth segment should be folded towards the entrance to the Ohel – i.e., that half of it should cover the entrance. This leaves us with two cubits of this segment for covering the roof of the Mishkan. Since the overall width of the greater curtain was twenty-four cubits, there remained twenty-two cubits for covering the Kodesh. However, the length of the Kodesh – as noted above – was only twenty cubits. Hence we deduce that the clasps of the goat-hair curtains leaned inwards towards the Kodesh Ha-kodashim by two cubits.[3] Although it is logical that the clasps of the goatskins would not face directly the clasps of the curtains of the Mishkan, in order to ensure better sealing, the Torah does not explain why these clasps are pulled inwards to the Kodesh Ha-kodashim rather than outwards. Likewise, no explicit reason is given as to why both Mishkan curtains and goatskin curtains are necessary. I shall attempt to answer this question below.

#### THICKNESS OF THE MISHKAN BOARDS

The length of all the boards of the Mishkan was ten cubits, and their width a cubit and a half. The Torah makes no mention of their thickness. We must conclude, then, that this measurement is of no significance. The importance of the Mishkan is inward rather than outward, and therefore only its internal measurements are noted.

The internal length of the Mishkan is at least thirty cubits, since there are twenty boards each a cubit and a half wide. The width of the Mishkan is at least nine cubits, for there are six boards on its western side. This number is somewhat inconvenient, for it is not a common number in the Torah. It is difficult to rest with the assumption that the Mishkan is thirty cubits long and nine cubits wide. Our difficulty becomes even more acute in light of the fact that the length of the Kodesh Ha-kodashim is ten cubits; it does not seem reasonable that its length should be ten cubits if its width is nine.[4] We are therefore led to conclude that the inner measurement of width of the Mishkan was ten cubits. This assumption is confirmed by the structure of the curtains, as will be explained below.

The Sages determine that the boards were a cubit thick. However, there is some dispute as to whether they are oblong in shape – such that their thickness remains uniform throughout their length – or whether they take the form of a split pyramid (a sort of right-angled triangle), such that their thickness measures a cubit only at the bottom; at the top they are almost a point. The latter option seems more probable, for a number of reasons.

First of all, the boards involve a weight problem. If the board is a cubit thick from top to bottom, and it is made of solid wood, then the volume of each board is much more than a cubic meter of wood. Based on a conservative estimate that the specific weight of wood is half of the weight of water (in fact, different types of wood have different weights), we conclude that each board weighs more than half a metric ton. Since the Mishkan included at least fifty boards, we must arrive at the fantastic total of around twenty-five tons (not including poles, the boards of the screen, the parokhet, etc.). The Torah states that two wagons served to transport the boards. Thus, if our calculations are correct, each wagon – drawn by only two oxen – must have borne more than twelve tons. Clearly, this is not physically possible, but nowhere is there any indication that the transportation of the boards in the wagons was in any way miraculous. If, on the other hand, we assume that the boards stood in the shape of a split pyramid, their weight is halved, which seems more reasonable.[5]

Secondly, the Torah states that on the western side of the Mishkan there were six boards, and another two boards for the edges of the Mishkan. If the boards were a uniform thickness of a cubit and a half, the boards at the corners should be no different from the others. Assuming that the internal width of the Mishkan is ten cubits, the width of each board at a corner could also be a cubit and a half, of which one cubit covers the width of the boards on the northern or southern side, while the remaining half-cubit is devoted to the internal width of the Mishkan. Hence there is no need for the Torah to tell us that there are two boards on the corners. The general statement telling us that on the western side there were eight identical boards would have been sufficient. If the thickness of the boards was negligible, or if they were in pyramid form, then the boards of the corners would have to be a different shape from the boards in the middle of each side (in order to close the corner – they would have to be of full thickness), and we must

therefore assert that there were special boards for the corners of the Mishkan.

Thirdly, the Torah fails to describe how the curtains were placed upon the boards. The length of the curtains was twenty-eight cubits. This length was laid sideways upon the Mishkan. The inner width of the Mishkan measured ten cubits. We are thus left with eighteen cubits. If the thickness of the boards at the top was a cubit, then each covered eight cubits of the board. This would look strange, for there is no special reason to cover specifically eight cubits, rather than seven cubits or eight and a half cubits. The authorities who maintain this opinion would counter that the Torah wanted to leave one cubit of gold revealed, and – correspondingly – a cubit of silver (on the assumption that the silver sockets were a cubit high). However, this hypothesis does not seem to sit well, and it seems preferable to adopt the opinion according to which the boards were shaped as split pyramids. According to this view, since the width of the board was small, the curtains covered nine cubits on each side, down to the height of the sockets (although the outer length of the boards was a little more than ten cubits, this discrepancy is negligible).[6] Based on this understanding, the picture that arises seems more reasonable: the curtains of the Mishkan covered all the gold of the boards. The goatskin curtains, on the other hand, covered all the boards, including the silver sockets.

We are left with the question of the need for the goatskin curtains, and why these cover the silver sockets, while the curtains of the Mishkan do not cover them.

#### MISHKAN OR MIKDASH?

The goatskin curtains would seem to represent an essential part of the Mishkan. They are not a mere covering: the Torah describes in detail their fashioning out of twelve segments, joined with clasps – in contrast to the ram and tachash skins, concerning which the Torah provides no elaboration whatsoever, not even their measurements. The Torah declares that the function of these curtains is "to canopy (le-ahel) over the Mishkan" (26:7).[7] From these words, we are unable to arrive at an understanding of the function of this "canopy."

The Torah fills in this missing information in parashat Naso. In its description of how the Mishkan is carried by the family of Gershon, the text stipulates that they must carry the curtains of the Mishkan and the Ohel Mo'ed, "its covering and the tachash cover that is upon it" ([Bamidbar 4:25](#)). "Its covering" means, apparently, the goat skins. Thus the Torah defines the function of the goat skins as an "Ohel Mo'ed" over the Mishkan. The expression "Ohel Mo'ed" (Tent of Meeting) has a double meaning: it denotes a place of meeting, but the word "mo'ed" also means time. These two meanings may be interconnected: any meeting must take place at a certain time.

In different places in the Torah, the term "Ohel Mo'ed" describes different things. Sometimes it refers to the whole Mishkan, while at other times it describes specifically and exclusively the Kodesh, without the Kodesh Ha-kodashim.[8] In any event, in our context (the role of carrying that is the responsibility of the family of Gershon), the term clearly refers to the goat skins. We

may say, then, that the function of the goat skins is to serve as an Ohel Mo'ed.

The full significance of this assertion becomes clear if we address the dual nature of the Mishkan. On the one hand, the Mishkan is God's "home." On the other hand, it is the place where God meets with Bnei Yisrael through their representative – Moshe. This dual role is emphasized in the very first command concerning the construction of the Mishkan: "Let them make Me a Mikdash, and I shall dwell amongst them" (25:8). God commands the construction of a MIKDASH, not a MISHKAN. Bnei Yisrael, for their part, create a Mikdash (Sanctuary) for God. This Mikdash will serve as the place of meeting between God and the nation as a continuation of the giving of Torah at Sinai. God, for His part, will make this Mikdash into His home – His abode, or Mishkan. (The term mikdash stresses sanctity, while mishkan denotes dwelling.) Emphasizing this duality, the dual function of the Mishkan finds expression in its structure, too: the curtains of the Mishkan represent God's resting place, while the goat skins relate to the Mikdash that is created by Israel, in which the encounter between them (through Moshe) and God takes place.

This dual nature also finds expression in the difference between the Mishkan and the courtyard. In the Mishkan itself, the dominant material is gold. In the courtyard, in contrast, there is silver (surrounding the pillars of the courtyard) and copper. Since the goat-hair curtains represent Bnei Yisrael, these curtains contain no blue, purple and scarlet. These colors belong to the Mishkan itself. Even the clasps of the goat-hair curtains are made of copper, which is identified principally with the courtyard.

In accordance with this division, we may understand why it is specifically the goat-hair curtains that cover the silver sockets. The sockets are made from the half-shekel raised from Bnei Yisrael. These sockets are made specifically of silver, for Bnei Yisrael are allowed only into the courtyard, not into the Mishkan itself. Thus it is appropriate that they be represented with silver, rather than with gold. The curtains of the Mishkan, creating the Mishkan as God's resting place (for the boards are boards for the Mishkan; they are not of primary importance), do not reach the silver sockets, which symbolize Bnei Yisrael's part of the relationship. It is rather the goat-hair curtains, representing the Mishkan as the place of meeting between God and Israel, that cover the silver sockets, which symbolize Bnei Yisrael.

The duality also finds expression within the Mishkan itself: the Mishkan is divided into two parts that are joined by means of clasps. If we imagine the Mishkan as a home, the outer room contains a table and a lamp. It functions as the guest room. The inner chamber is the resting place of God, and there "any man or woman who approaches the King, coming from the outside inwards, and who has not been called – his fate is unequivocally to be put to death." How, then, could Moshe enter the Kodesh Ha-kodashim? Aharon's entry is even more problematic, since he was not even permitted to ascend Mount Sinai.

On the basis of what we have said above, we can understand how the Torah solves this problem. As we have said, the goat-hair curtains belong, essentially, to the courtyard. The courtyard

is an area into which Bnei Yisrael are permitted to enter. The goat skins consist of two segments, which divide the Mishkan into an outer area, where entry is permitted, and an internal area, where entry to Bnei Yisrael is forbidden. However, the inner part of the goatskin curtain does not start precisely above the parokhet, as we may have expected. The clasps joining the two segments are actually located two cubits behind the place of the parokhet, which lies precisely under the clasps joining the Mishkan curtains. Thus a two-cubit space is created with a dual status: from the point of view of the Mishkan curtains, which represent God's Presence in His abode, this space represents part of the Kodesh Ha-kodashim. However, based on the location of the goat-hair curtains – which symbolize the Mishkan as the place of meeting between God and Bnei Yisrael – this space is not part of the Kodesh Ha-kodashim, but rather part of the Kodesh.

When the Kohen Gadol enters this space, from his perspective he is still standing in the Kodesh, while from God's perspective he is already within the inner chamber – in the Kodesh Ha-kodashim. It is this dual status that in fact facilitates the partial entry into the Kodesh Ha-kodashim. But this entry requires that the parokhet move two cubits inward, for it is the parokhet that separates between the outer area, where entry is permitted, and the inner chamber, where it is forbidden. It appears that the adjustment of the parokhet is accomplished by the cloud of incense, which serves as a screen separating the Kohen Gadol, as he enters, from the Ark.[9]

We can now understand why there is no mention of Moshe having been shown a vision of the courtyard while he was atop Mount Sinai, although we are told explicitly that he saw the various parts of the Mishkan (vessels, boards and sacrificial altar). As we have said, the Ohel Mo'ed represents the continuation of Sinai. This explains the need for Moshe to see the form of the Mishkan while he was still on the m. The courtyard serves as an area for Bnei Yisrael; as such, it does not, in itself, represent a continuation of Sinai – for Bnei Yisrael were not allowed to ascend the mountain. It is clear, then, why Moshe did not "see" the courtyard while on the mountain. It is also clear why the priestly garments were not shown to him: the kohanim were also not permitted to ascend (at least at the beginning of the Revelation, and it is possible that even afterwards they were able to ascend only because the Shekhina had already departed [10]).

The sacrificial altar was shown to him, because the altar is connected to the Revelation of the Shekhina, as I hope to explain when we reach parashat Shemini. For now let us just note that at the time of the Revelation the adult congregation of Bnei Yisrael did not offer sacrifices; it was the youth who did this. This fact demonstrates that the altar is beyond where Bnei Yisrael are permitted to go, and for this reason it was shown to Moshe on Har Sinai – as associated with the Mishkan itself, in which God's Shekhina prevails.

Bnei Yisrael are forbidden to enter the Mishkan because they themselves did not want to enter into a direct dialogue with God at the time of the Revelation, preferring instead to maintain contact through Moshe. This preference on their part gives rise to a certain distance between Bnei Yisrael and God's abode. The function of the screen and the parokhet is to prevent Bnei

Yisrael from being able to see the inside of the Mishkan – and especially the inner chamber. This function is essentially a technical one; it is not fundamentally related to the structure of the Mishkan. For this reason, the command concerning the parokhet, and concerning the screen, is separate from the description of the structure of the Mishkan, which also explains the fact that Moshe was not shown these items upon Har Sinai.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

NOTES:

[1] See my shiur on parashat Yitro.

[2] Admittedly, the screen at the entrance, like the screen of the courtyard gate, is made of blue, purple and scarlet thread. We may explain this in light of the fact that these elements represent the path to the Mishkan, and therefore may be considered, to some extent, part of the Mishkan itself.

[3] We may draw the same conclusion from the fact that half of the curtain hangs down behind the Mishkan, beyond the Mishkan curtains, and hence the clasps are drawn inwards.

[4] There is room to argue that if the thickness of the boards of the parokhet is one cubit, then these boards occupy a cubit of the area of the Kodesh, and we are therefore left with a square area measuring nine cubits by nine cubits. However, since these numbers – as noted – are uncommon in the Torah, this hypothesis is equally problematic. Likewise, the possibilities regarding the laying of the curtains upon the Mishkan according to this approach is difficult to understand. I have addressed this discussion only partially so as not to overburden the reader with detailed measurements.

[5] We cannot rule out the possibility that the boards were hollow. If this was the case, it is difficult to know how much they weighed, but in any case the split pyramid shape would make them considerably lighter.

[6] I have not addressed here the question of how the curtains were placed upon the back portion of the Mishkan. The simple understanding would seem to be that the segments at the back covered an additional cubit of the boards (no matter which explanation we adopt). But this assumption gives rise to asymmetry between the curtains of the courtyard and the curtain at the back. Maybe there is no need for this hypothesis; perhaps the question turns on whether the curtains of the Mishkan covered part of the entrance, as well as whether the pillars of the screen were an addition to the length of the Mishkan or whether they were included in it.

[7] I shall not enter here into the controversy among the Sages as to whether there were two coverings or a single one.

[8] The same type of ambiguity is found in parashat Acharei-Mot, where it is not clear whether the term "ohel mo'ed" refers to the Mishkan as a whole or only to the "heikhal."

[9] It should be added that the simple meaning of the text suggests that Moshe, too, offers incense when he enters, whether he enters the Kodesh Ha-kodashim or just the Kodesh.

[10] I hope to elaborate on this question when we reach parashat Pekudei. In any event, part of the answer is already included above.

Visit our website: <http://etzion.org.il/en>