

In Search of...

This week's Torah portion, *Parshat Terumah*, introduces a new phase into the society of Israel: Institution building. The first Jewish community begins a capital campaign to build the Tabernacle, the Mishkan, God's portable dwelling place. For thinkers such as Nachmanides, the Mishkan was the embodiment of the people's spiritual aspirations. Throughout their long years of servitude and into their emancipation, the Hebrews longed to commune with God. Now, they would have a place, a portable temple, where they would direct their longings for the Divine. (See Nachmanides, Intro to Exodus)

But the Tabernacle represented more than a natural spiritual evolution for the newly formed nation. The Midrash relates a parable about the Tabernacle: A king is about to marry off his daughter and only child, the princess, to a king from another land. The new husband wants to return to his homeland with his queen. But the father/king feels conflicted: Parting from his only child is too much. Yet, he also realizes that he cannot stand in their way and prevent them from leaving. So the father/king asks of them a favor: Build me a small hut so that I can live near you, wherever you may go.

The Midrash concludes its lesson: After God has gifted the Torah to Israel, He is not ready to be separated from her and, yet, He does not want to impede Israel's departure to their land and their life. So, God asks the people, "Make for Me a Temple." (Exodus 25:8; See Midrash Rabba, 33:1)

The Midrash offers a vastly different view of the Tabernacle from Nachmanides. The primary function of the Tabernacle is not to bring the people close to God, but to keep God close to his daughter, to the Torah. For Nachmanides, God and the people recognize the great power invested in the Tabernacle: It is the human-Divine meeting place. Yet for the Midrash, the Tabernacle is the perpetual reminder of a father's wish to stay in proximity of his child.

Today, our synagogues resemble the Tabernacle and Temple of old. We often think of the synagogue in symbolic terms. The synagogue helps us discover our soulful longings, which have been obscured by the bitterness of exile; we are searching out God. But less commonly, we may think of the shul as a place where God is reaching for us, trying to hold onto us – to a child and a relationship that is beyond Him. In Heschel's language, the shul is a reminder that it is God who is in search of man.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,
Rabbi Menashe East