

Regarding the Building of the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant
From The Book of Exodus, Chapters 35 – 38
(Sermon given in honor of my son's Bar Mitzvah, March 4th, 2005)

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The older and more forgetful I become the more I appreciate the invention of the post-it note. Whenever I need to be reminded of something, such as a “honeydo”, God blessed me with a fairly good sized forehead to place a post-it note upon.

In doing some research on this week's Torah portion, I was struck with how many metaphoric post-it notes God leaves for his often forgetful progeny – sometimes we have to do a little digging in Torah to find these reminders – kind of like a treasure hunt. What is the nature of such reminders? They are concerned with the simplexities of this life in the form of rhetorical questions such as “who is that person looking back at you in the mirror every morning? Where do you really come from? Who formed you? And where are you going?” In the Torah, if we endeavor to seek, we may find the answers in the process of our searching for God, both within and without.

This week's Torah portion has rich treasure for every person, Jew and Gentile alike. Moses convokes all the community of Israel before him and relates to them God's desire that the people begin the construction of the holy Tabernacle, with all its furnishings and implements including the legendary Ark of the Covenant which held the stone tablets of the 10 commandments and Moses' writings. The Tabernacle is a portable sanctuary that accompanied the Children of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness. I say “is” because there are those who believe it still exists today, waiting to be found. I met one such explorer 2 weeks ago – a native Texas son named Dr. Vendyl Jones, the real live Indiana Jones of movie fame.

The Tabernacle consisted of three general areas: an outer courtyard bordered by a rectangular tent-wall, and an inner tented structure divided into two areas – one referred to as the Holy Place and the other the Holy of Holies which itself housed the Ark.

It was to be a place where God would dwell among His people on earth, accompanying them in nearness throughout their sojourn, along with the presence of a pillar of smoke in the day and a pillar of fire at night as symbolized on the Ark behind me that holds our own Torah scrolls here at Temple Sinai.

The Ark of the Covenant was made of Acacia wood plated with gold inside and out, with four rings on its sides holding two poles for transport, and a cover made of pure gold on which were fashioned two Cherubim, guardian angels, facing each other, wings outstretched above, heads bowed.

The dimensions of the Ark are stated as 2 and one half cubits in length by 1 and a half cubits in height and depth. These fractional numbers may seem arbitrary on the surface (why not use whole number dimensions such as 3 x 3 x 2?), however our sages point out that every single one of the roughly 305,000 Hebrew letters in the Torah are there by specific design and purpose, not haphazardly – none wasted.

If you compute the Ark's volume it is 5 and 5/8 or 5.625 cubic cubits - the digits of both forms of this number happen to add up to 18, *chai* – representing life itself. Try to see how many numbers whose digits add up to 18 are equivalent to their fractional form when its digits are summed. But it goes deeper. The perimeter of the Ark is 8 cubits in length – the number 8 turned on its side symbolizing infinity. The 8th letter of the Hebrew aleph-bet is *chet*, the first letter of the two-letter word *chai*. The letter *chet* represents the concept of a boundary, shell, or perimeter, as in a fenced-in region. The *chet* delineates the finite within the infinite.

The dimensions of the Ark itself add up to 5.5 – whose digits add up to 10 – a number representative of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, with its 10 divine emanations of infinity (“no-thingness” according to the Sefer Yetzirah – the Book of Formation attributed to Abraham). The tenth and smallest letter of the Hebrew aleph-bet is *yud*, which happens to be the second and last letter of the word *chai*. The *yud* represents our personal consciousness which is connected to God. It is the smallest letter to remind us that when our ego dominates us there is no room for Divinity to dwell within. Every Hebrew letter

incorporates the *yud*. Kabbalah tells us that these letters are the very instruments of creation, each “signed” with God’s “signature” as a reminder of His ever-presence.

Could it be a coincidence that the sum of the Ark’s perimeter length and the sum of its spatial dimensions add up to its volume whose digits, expressed as both a fractional number and a decimal number, add up to 18 – *chai*? If this is not an example of “intelligent design” I don’t know what is! Clearly the Ark itself was a symbolic post-it note reminding every human being to perpetually “choose the gift of unbounded, Endless Life.”

Moses first instructs the people about the Sabbath day. A day, we are reminded, to follow God’s example in the creation and not DO any work, not even to build a holy sanctuary for the Lord. It is a day, just like this day, to rejoice in creation, to reflect on beingness itself, on life in all its glory, just as God reflected on his creation following the sixth day and pronounced it “very good” indeed. Considering that the seventh and last day is Shabbat, it is interesting that Moses discusses this first, before enjoining the people to build the Tabernacle. As Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Britain points out, the Shabbat is the seventh day from God’s viewpoint and the first day from humanity’s perspective. Shabbat itself is symbolic of the state of creation at the end of days following the messiah’s arrival – it is also the vision of where we are headed, back to the paradise that IS the Garden of Eden, with the Tabernacle as a metaphoric vehicle to take us there!

"Take from among you gifts to the Lord."

Moses then instructed the people to bring gold, silver, bronze, fine linens, and wood for the building of the Tabernacle in the name of God. "Everyone whose heart so moves him shall bring them." And they did so. In fact they brought so much stuff that they had to be told “stop, enough”! The people had been called upon - and they responded, big time! And this was no small feat for a stiff-necked people who had gathered rather rebelliously at the foot of Mt. Sinai bringing copious amounts of gold in order to construct a golden calf for worship. At that time they reacted out of anxiety and fear when Moses did not return from the mount on time as expected. Clearly this was not the optimal expression of

the creative impulse. The episode of the golden calf was arguably the greatest debacle of the young Jewish nation and yet, through God's infinite compassion they received another chance to "make good" by constructing the Tabernacle – to, in a sense, earn their Divine inheritance – to be THAT which they were created and destined to be – spiritual souls, each of us formed as a unique reflection of God!

The mechanics of the metaphysics of reflection are also uniquely expressed in the Torah from Genesis to the building of the Tabernacle. Scholars note that the Bible uses the principles of reflection and symmetry throughout as a literary device called a chiasmus. It's the simple idea of a series of events occurring then re-occurring in the reverse order, for example, events A-B-C followed by C-B-A. Another example is a reflection in a mirror or a partial reflection in a window. It is a pattern that is even rendered geometrically in the Star of David itself with its inverted and interlocking triangles. It is the basis of the concept of what is referred to in eastern philosophies as karma – one reaps what one sows, or the basis of justice inherent in the golden rule – do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

In the beginning God creates the universe as a dwelling place for his beloved offspring. A series of events then transpires in which humankind distances themselves from God beginning with the fall of Adam and culminating in the golden calf. However, starting with Abraham, there is a reversal of this pattern that eventually leads to the astonishing events surrounding the building of the Tabernacle, which in turn sets the stage for the construction of King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem some 400 years later.

Just as God created a dwelling place for humanity in the beginning of days, the Children of Israel achieved not just one miracle in the building of the Tabernacle, but two. They proactively chose to make their individual and collective wills congruent with God's will and in so doing they became a people, a community of unique souls who re-committed themselves to a focused and sacred task - not just building a physical habitation for God on earth, but also allowing there to be room for the *Shechinah* – the Holy Spirit - to dwell within each of them. Humanity reflecting God, reflecting humanity, on and on forever.

And indeed if we take a close look at the very structure of the Tabernacle, we will find features that mimic human form. For example the Ark which holds the inner wisdom, understanding and knowledge of the universe is analogous to the human mind, while the alter of incense, which yields a sweet odor, appears to symbolize the human heart. But the Tabernacle was not a completed picture of a human – there were features missing. Yet, King Solomon’s Temple in which the furnishings of the Tabernacle eventually came to rest, was indeed in the form of the *Adam Kadmon*, the primordial-archetypal human whom the Kabbalist recognizes in the imagery of the Tree of Life – the same Tree of Life that stood in the Garden of Eden whose gates were guarded by two Cherubim wielding flaming swords to prevent Adam and Eve from returning. Perhaps the message here is: your very being, created in the image and similitude of God, is a Holy Tabernacle.

But now resolving the chiasmus that began with the fall of Adam, we see that the Ark of the Covenant with ITS two Cherubim, contains within it the very Heart of Truth – the Torah – which as it is said: “it is a Tree of Life to those who hold fast to it.”

And so we have come full circle from Genesis to Exodus – a circle that encompasses ourselves and God – bound all together as One.

The past few months have been a most challenging period for our entire family. Throughout I have been reminded time and again of the words from Proverbs: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Do not lean upon your own understanding. Acknowledge Him in all your ways and He will direct your paths.”

So the next time you look in the mirror to check for post-it notes on *your* forehead, I invite you to gaze a little more closely into your own eyes – the windows of your soul – and see the reflection of your Divine self.

May our will be one with God’s will.

Adonai oz l’amo yitein, Adonai yivareich et amo bashalom. May God grant strength to peoples everywhere, and may God bless us all with peace. Amen.