



NORTHWEST YESHIVA HIGH SCHOOL

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Thoughts on the Parasha

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Parshat Terumah 5766

And they should create for me a sanctuary and I will dwell among them. (Shemot 25:8)

In this *pasuk*, Hashem instructs Moshe to command Bnai Yisrael to construct the *Mishcan*. Hashem tells Bnai Yisrael that through this *Mishcan*, He will dwell among the people.

This passage cannot be understood literally. In order to understand the difficulty presented by a literal interpretation of the *pasuk*, an introduction is needed. Maimonides, in his commentary on the Mishne, enumerates the basic foundations of the Torah. The third of these basic principles is that the Almighty is not, in any sense, material.¹

Maimonides discusses this principle in further detail in his Mishne Torah. He, again, explains that the Almighty is not material. He adds that it is also inappropriate to attribute to Hashem any of the characteristics associated with physical bodies. For example, Hashem does not have a front or back. One cannot ascribe physical actions to the Almighty. Also, one cannot ascribe a place to Hashem.²

This principle, identified by Maimonides, is a logical extension of the proposition that Hashem is a unity. The Torah clearly states, "Hashem is one."³ This statement tells us that there is only one G-d. However, our Sages understand the passage to also mean that the Almighty is a perfect unity. This means that He has no parts or aspects. He is not subject to division. He is an absolute representation of "oneness."⁴ The principle of Hashem's unity precludes attribution of a material existence to Him. Any material entity has parts, or aspects. It has a front and back, or dimensions. These characteristics contradict the concept of absolute unity.

Furthermore, the Torah clearly states that Hashem is not material. This principle is communicated in Moshe's review of the event of Revelation. He reminds the nation that they had experienced Revelation at Sinai. In this experience, the Almighty was not represented by any material image.⁵

¹ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Commentary on the Mishne*, Mesechet Sanhedrin 10:1.

² Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah, 1:11.

³ Sefer Devarim 6:4.

⁴ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah, 1:7.

⁵ Sefer Devarim 4:15. See Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Commentary on the Mishne*, Mesechet Sanhedrin 10:1.

We can now understand the difficulty presented by our passage. If our passage is interpreted literally, it contradicts this principle. Literally understood, our passage attributes location to the Almighty. The passage states that Hashem will dwell among Bnai Yisrael! This is impossible. Hashem is not material. Therefore, it is not correct to say He dwells in any place.

Unkelus is sensitive to this anthropomorphism. In his translation of our passage, he alters the problematic phrase. In his rendering, the phrase reads, "and I will cause the Divine presence to dwell among them." Unkelus' intention is to remove any attribution of place to the Almighty. According to Unkelus, the passage refers to Hashem's Divine presence or influence. In other words, the passage describes a providential relationship. The Almighty will exercise His providence over the *Mishcan* and the people.

Rav Yosef Albo, in his *Sefer HaIkkrim*, uses the same approach to explain various anthropomorphic expressions found in the Torah. A few examples will illustrate this approach. Hashem tells us, in reference to the Temple, "Mine eyes and Mine heart shall be there perpetually."⁶ Hashem does not have eyes or a heart. The intent of the passage is to communicate that a special providential influence exists over the *Mikdash*.⁷ The Torah states that at Revelation, "the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain."⁸ This passage does not intend to communicate that Hashem was present at Revelation. This would attribute a place to the Almighty. Instead, the passage is stating that the influence of the Almighty was evidenced through a physical manifestation. In this case, the manifestation was the conflagration that appeared at the top of Sinai.⁹ It should be noted that the *pasuk* refers to the "glory" of the Almighty. This supports this interpretation. The Almighty was not present. However, the fire indicated His "glory" or influence.

One anthropomorphic expression has occasioned considerable discussion among the Sages. One of the names used for the Almighty is *HaMakom*—the Place.¹⁰ This is popularly understood to mean that the Divine presence extends everywhere. However, our Sages provide a different explanation of the term. They

⁶ Melachim I 9:3.

⁷ Rav Yosef Albo, *Sefer HaIkkrim*, volume2, chapter 14.

⁸ Sefer Shemot 24:17.

⁹ Rav Yosef Albo, *Sefer HaIkkrim*, volume2, chapter 17.

¹⁰ For example, see Mesechet Avot 2:9.

explain that the term means that Hashem is the *makom*—the place—of the universe.¹¹

This explanation is very difficult to understand. How can the Sages refer to Hashem as the place of the universe? Hashem is not material. He is not a place! Rav Yitzchak Arama offers a novel interpretation of the Sages' comments. He explains that the term place can be understood as the base upon which something rests or is supported. As an example, he cites the second mishne of Tractate Avot. The mishne explains that the world stands on three pillars—Torah study, Divine service, and acts of kindness. The intent of the mishne is that these three activities are essential to the existence of the world. The mishne expresses this idea by representing the world as standing on these activities. In other words, standing in a place—upon the pillars of Torah study, Divine service and acts of kindness—represents dependency. Rav Arama explains that the name *HaMakom* communicates the universe's dependency upon the Almighty. He is the "place" upon which the universe stands. This means the universe only exists as a result of His continuing will. His will supports the universe's existence. Without His will, the universe would cease to exist.¹²

And you should overlay it with pure gold. On the inside and outside you should overlay it. And you should make a gold crown surrounding it. (Shemot 25:11)

The Torah describes the construction of the Aron—the Ark. The Aron was made of acacia wood. It was overlaid with gold. The gold covered the inner and outer surfaces of the Ark.

Rashi explains that the Ark was composed of three separate boxes. The smallest box was made of gold. A slightly larger box was constructed from acacia wood. The largest box was made of gold. The acacia box was placed within the largest gold box. The smallest gold box was placed within the acacia box. This fulfilled the requirement of the passage. The inner and outer surfaces of the wood box were covered with gold.¹³

The Chumash refers to the gold as an "overlay." The term overlay implies that the gold was an adornment of the Ark. The essential material was apparently the wood. This is difficult to reconcile with Rashi's description of the Aron's construction. According to Rashi, the Aron was constructed of three boxes. Each had its own structural integrity. In fact, it would seem more correct to define the gold as the essential component. The wood box was hidden within the two gold boxes!

¹¹ Midrash Rabba, Sefer Beresheit 68:9.

¹² Rav Yitzchak Arama, *Akeydat Yitzchak on Sefer Shemot*, Parshat Terumah.

¹³ Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), *Commentary on Sefer Shemot* 25:11.

Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra disagrees with Rashi. He maintains that the gold overlay was not created through constructing a series of boxes. Instead, he interprets this requirement literally. The overlay was a coating over the wood of the Aron.¹⁴ We can easily appreciate the reason for Ibn Ezra's position. The Torah refers to the gold as an overlay. According to Ibn Ezra, this description is completely accurate. However, according to Rashi, this does not seem to be an appropriate description.

Rabbaynu Avraham ben HaRambam offers a brilliant explanation of Rashi's position. An introduction is necessary to understand his insight.

The Chumash describes the dimension of the Aron. It was two cubits long, one and a half cubits wide and a cubit and a half high.¹⁵ This requirement presents an interesting problem. The Aron was composed of three boxes. Each had different dimensions. Obviously only one box could conform to the dimensions required by the Torah! To which box did the required dimensions apply?

Rabbaynu Avraham ben HaRambam responds that the measurements were applied to the acacia box. This box was required to conform to the dimensions dictated by the Torah. The inner and outer gold boxes were designed to accommodate the measurements of the middle acacia box.¹⁶

This answers our question. The application of the measurements to the acacia box indicates that this was the essential box. In this manner, the Torah acknowledges the fundamental nature of this middle box. Accordingly, it refers to the gold boxes as an overlay. It is true that these boxes had independent structural integrity. However, in function, they were an overlay.

¹⁴ Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, *Commentary on Sefer Shemot*, 25:10.

¹⁵ Sefer Shemot 25:10.

¹⁶ Rabbaynu Avraham ben HaRambam *Commentary on Sefer Shemot* 25:11.

