

In the rest of the Book of Exodus, we read about the ancient portable Tabernacle which was built during the 40 years of wandering in the Sinai Wilderness, after the Israelite Exodus from Egyptian servitude.

There are lessons which can be learned from this ancient building project, even though we have no archeological proof that the Tabernacle actually existed. These lessons include the idea that every Israelite contributed precious metals to be melted down for the metal fittings, and many Israelites participated in the labor.

However, these lessons still beg a larger question: "*Why build the Tabernacle in the first place?*" There are as many chapters about the Tabernacle as there are about the Exodus experience itself. To explore this question, we need to go back to the early chapters in the Book of Exodus.

At first glance, it seems that there are three separate books contained in the Book of Exodus: discussions of the Exodus from Egypt, the Revelation at Mt. Sinai, and the Building of the Tabernacle. I want to show that in fact they are not only related, but that this has relevance for our lives today.

During the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh, there was some curious language used. When Moses demanded that the Israelites be freed, he did not tell Pharaoh that it was because slavery is wrong, or because they wanted to become a free nation. Rather he quoted God as saying, "The Israelites should be freed so that they could serve God in the Wilderness."

It turns out that this was not just an excuse for fleeing Egypt. One way of looking at the entire Exodus experience, in whatever form it actually happened, is exactly this idea: the main purpose of the Exodus was so that God could have a personal relationship with the Israelite People.

Could God have arranged this while they were in Egypt? No, for several reasons. As slaves, the Israelites existed at such a basic level of need, they were not in a position to be open to a relationship with God. They were just trying to survive their harsh daily life and the Egyptian oppression.

Once the Israelites were freed, how then was God to build a relationship with them? The awesome events of crossing the Reed Sea and the experience at Sinai seem not to have been enough for them. Within days of escaping from Pharaoh's army they wanted to go back to Egypt, and within days of the Revelation at Sinai they built the Golden Calf, because they felt that Moses had abandoned them while he was on Mt. Sinai with God.

In our closing hymn *Adon Olam* there are two different Jewish views of how God is portrayed. The first three verses speak of a distant, Transcendent God who is so far beyond humanity, this God cannot be known. Then the last two verses speak of an Imminent God who cares about each of us, and Who walks right alongside each of us.

The first view of God is reflected in the miracle of crossing the Reed Sea, and in the awe-filled meeting at Mt. Sinai - where God literally seemed to speak from the volcano. So if this was the only experience the Israelites had of God, how could God become

close enough to them to build a relationship? To put it into other words, how could that powerful God become a good neighbor?

The answer was to build the portable Tabernacle, which in Hebrew is called the "*Mishkan*". Hebrew words are built on three-letter roots, and the root "*Sh. K. N.*" of the word "*Mishkan*" is the same as the modern Hebrew word for *neighborhood*, and also for God's imminent presence - the "*Shechinah*", considered to be a feminine aspect of God.

What an awesome concept! We start the main *Shacharit* service with this word: "*Shochein Ad, Marom v'Kadosh Sh'mo*" - "God **dwells** among us forever, exalted and holy is God's Name". The Tabernacle signified to the ancient Israelites that this powerful God of miracles and Revelation was going to dwell among them. By building a "House" for God, the tallest and largest building right in the middle of the Israelite desert camp, it was visible to all that God's Presence dwelt among them.

So what does this have to do with us, over 3,200 years later? Judaism has survived and even flourished during 2000 years of Diaspora because we have observed Shabbat and Festivals as sacred time, rather than being bound only to a specific sacred space. However, while we know that we can pray to God anywhere, we also build synagogues in those places where we settle.

This synagogue of ours is the modern successor to that ancient Tabernacle built in the Sinai Wilderness, and it too represents God's presence among us. We know that God does not actually live in the Ark, and that the *Torah* is a parchment scroll fixed on wooden rollers. However, we imbue the *Torah* and in fact this very building with a sense of holiness, of God's presence, by gathering here for worship and community fellowship.

One would think that a powerful God could have created a dwelling-place and given it to the Israelites, but how much better it was for the Israelites to do the work themselves, thus bringing God's presence into their midst. Nowadays, we call this "taking ownership", and this is the only way God can "dwell among us".

Another Hebrew name for the ancient Tabernacle was the "*Ohel Mo-ed*", the "Tent of Meeting". This is similar to the modern Hebrew word for our building: "*Beit K'neset*" or "House of Assembly". "*Synagoga*" means the same thing in Greek, and now we use the term "*Synagogue*" to describe a place where Jews gather for religious assembly.

However, it is clear that "Assembly" is not just among congregants who gather to share worship and fellowship. The "Assembly" is also our **meeting with God** through that worship and through that fellowship. Our ancient Israelite ancestors built and furnished the portable Tabernacle, the "*Mishkan*", with the best of what they had. We too must each provide resources, do the work, and "take ownership", so that God can continue to dwell among us. For where we Jews gather together, God's Presence or "*Shechinah*" will also be among us, if we invite her in.