

**The Purpose of the Sanctuary: Two Views.** Immediately following the covenant ceremony at Sinai, during which

Israel declared, **וְנִשְׁמָע וְנַעֲשֶׂה**-we will do and we will **hearken**, the Torah lists the instructions for building the sanctuary. This sequence of events prompted Ramban to observe that this is similar to the process of conversion to Judaism, in which a prospective convert first commits to the covenant (like Israel did at Sinai) and then creates a life of organized by that commitment, (like making a sanctuary). For Ramban, the sanctuary is thus a symbol of **Covenant**, a place where the covenantal relationship between God and Israel grows. But a different view is offered in Midrash Tanhuma.

...והנה הם קדושים, ראויים שיהיה בהם מקדש להשרות שכינתו ביניהם ולכן צוה תחלה על דבר המשכן שיהיה לו בית בתוכם מקדש לשמו, ושם ידבר עם משה ויצוה את בני ישראל. רמב"ן כה:א	...and thus when they achieve a status of holiness it is appropriate that they have a sanctuary so that the Divine Presence can dwell among them therefore, the first thing that God instructed them was about the sanctuary so that God would have a home in their midst dedicated to his name and that there he would speak with Moses and instruct the children of Israel. Ramban on Exodus 25:1
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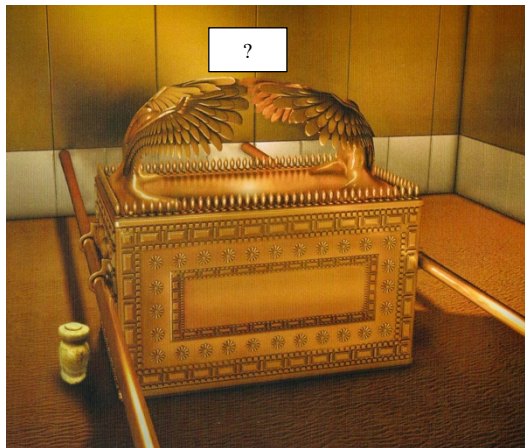
אימתי נאמרה למשה הפקדה הזו של משכן? ביום הכפורים עצמו, אף על פי שפרשת המשכן קודמת למעשה העגל... אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: יבא זהב שבמשכן ויכפר על זהב שנעשה בו את העגל... מדרש תנחומא תרומה ח	When was this specific parasha related to the mishkan (sanctuary) spoken to Moses? On Yom Kippur itself even though the parasha of the mishkan precedes the Golden Calf incident... The Holy One blessed be He said: Let the gold of the mishkan come and atone for the gold from which the Golden Calf was fashioned... Midrash Tahuma, Terumah 8
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There, the sanctuary is seen primarily as a place of where the people can achieve **Atonement**. So then what is the primary purpose of the sanctuary? Is it to build the ongoing covenantal relationship between God and Israel or to repair it? We would likely argue that these two roles need not be mutually exclusive. Like any edifice, it can be built and repaired at the same time. We all live in houses in which we will repair things that are broken and renovate things that need to be renovated. The sanctuary functions in both ways.

**The Zone of Meeting.** The most important element of the mishkan is the Ark of the Covenant, which is also referred to as the Ark of the Testimony. The text tells us that God will **speak from between the cherubim**. But where is that

ונועדתי לך שם ודברתי איתך מעל הכפרת מבין שני הכרובים אשר על ארון העדת את כל אשר אצוה אותך אל בני ישראל. שמות כה:כב	I will appoint-meeting with you there and I will speak with you from above the purgation-cover, from between the cherubim that are on the Ark of Testimony—all that I command you concerning the Children of Israel. Exod. 25:22
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space? How big is it? How does God actually **speak** from that space? Is there some kind of device there? And how are we to imagine it? And how can a space such as the one depicted below adequately contain God? Can God even be **contained** in a space? When cosmologists imagine the moment prior to the existence of the universe they speak of a **singularity**, "a dense seed, smaller than a proton, yet containing all the mass and energy of the universe." (Daniel Matt) It is from this **singularity** that



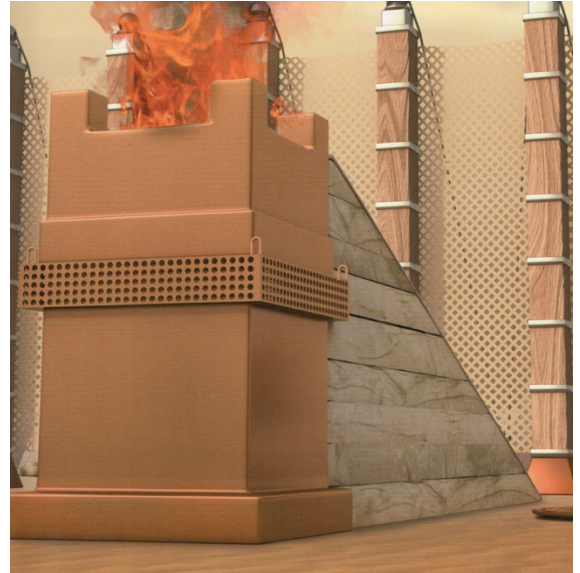
everything emerged after the Big Bang. A **singularity** above the Ark of the Covenant would be impossible - nothing would be able to exist around it, nevertheless, we can use the idea as a metaphor to imagine an infinitesimally small space from which God **speaks**. There are meditation techniques in which an individual attempts to clear out every thought and sound from the mind, and with eyes closed, tries to locate a single infinitesimal point of light. We can imagine that

antithetical parallelism (the parallelism of opposites) the second part of that verse is the exact opposite: **הללוהו ברקיע** -Praise Him in the firmament of His power that is, **in the infinite vastness of the universe that is also beyond all imagination**. The spiritual message is that God cannot be contained in any zone no matter how infinite or how infinitesimal. And yet, God **wants** to break through to us. That is the meaning of the mishkan.

people who are achieve that with some degree of proficiency probably also experience a deep state of peacefulness and oneness. The zone above the ark is a real space, but also an unimaginable space. It's a zone of spiritual paradox. **The Infinite emanating from the Infinitesimal**. This paradox is reflected in the opening verse of Psalm 150 which is very familiar to us from the siddur and many beautiful melodies: **הללו בקדשו אל**-Praise God in His kodesh that is, **praise God from the infinitesimal space that is located in the Holy of Holies above the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant, the place where God's speech emanates**. An infinitesimal zone that is beyond imagination. And, following the pattern of

<p>נבוב לחת תעשה אתו כאשר הראה אתך בהר כן יעשו. שמות כז:ח</p>	<p><b>Hollow</b>, of planks, <b>are you to make it;</b> <b>as he has granted you to see it</b> <b>on the mountain,</b> <b>thus are they to make it.</b> Exodus 27:8</p>
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**The Sacrificial Altar.**  
This verse is taken from the description of the outer altar. We tend not to focus on the details of these items because they



are so far from our world view and so completely remote from our own religious experiences. And yet, they are fascinating. Take for example the word **נבוב**, a word that only occurs four times in the entire Bible, which means **hollow**.<sup>1</sup> The altar is basically a hollow box. 5 cubits by 5 cubits square and 3 cubits high. Of course, it has to be hollow! If it were a complete block of wood, it would have been impossible to carry! It would have weighed approximately 12 tons!<sup>2</sup> Even the planks alone would have been very heavy. But according to Ovadiah Sforno, when it was set down, it was set down over a mound of earth, and the fire was on the top of the mound.<sup>3</sup> So imagine then that the altar is a large wooden box sitting on top of a mound of earth. The top of the box had a grating made of metal. The fire would be in the area of top of the mound and the metallic

grating and the sacrifices would be burned on top of the fire. Over time then, even with the regular removal of the ash, the ground below the grating would have become somewhat saturated. Imagine then, every time they had to move the altar, they had to either lift it off the mound or possibly even disassemble it and then reassemble it when they got to a new place. **God Shows the Mishkan and Its Elements.**

**כאשר הראה אתך בהר - as he has granted you to see it on the mountain.** On a couple of occasions, the text tells us that God **showed** the designs of the mishkan to Moses. In reference to the entirety of the mishkan (Exod. 26:30, in reference to the menorah, (Numbers 8:4) and here, in reference to the altar, we have forms of the verb **הראה-to cause you to see**. Interestingly enough, the only other occurrence of this form of the verb is in a verse from Deuteronomy that we use as the overture to the Simchat Torah Hakafot: **אתה הראת לדעת כי הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים - You yourself have been made to see, to know that God—he is God, there is none else beside him!** In her recent lecture on Parashat Terumah, Aviva Zornberg quoted the English art critic, novelist, painter and poet John Peter Berger (1926-2017):

*To see and to have seen confirms one's existence but risks being lost. The visible brings the world to us and also takes the world away from us. As soon as we can't see what we what we saw before, do we still have it? And do we still have what it did to us anymore?*

Zornberg explains:  
*There's a real anxiety about that, the things that your eyes have seen. So the idea would be, to struggle to prevent its disappearance. How we do that is by developing an inner eye. Berger uses this wonderful expression. He says, "The visible, (the experience of things that are visible), produces in us a faith in the invisible." It's highly paradoxical. The experience of the visible gives us a real experience which we hold on to as long as it's there. But when it disappears, the alternative to losing it entirely, is developing some kind of faith - that it's just around the corner somewhere. It's invisible - nevertheless it is still there. If I can hold onto it with my inner eye, I have a*

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**kind of faith in its continued existence.** Regarding the mishkan, we could say the following: God **causes Moses to see** the mishkan and all of its elements. Moses has to hold an image of it in his mind and transmit that image to the artisans who will then construct it. And then, here's what happens. Moses transmits the **description** of what he has been shown, they construct it, and that **description** was committed to memory and then redacted in text of the Torah; it was then transmitted to us. We read it, chant it, and study it with all of its layers of meaning. We may attempt to recreate the objects in art or as replicas, but we understand intuitively that any depiction or replica of the mishkan is, in the end, only an interpretation of the text. Thus, all depictions differ significantly from each other. The mishkan **exists** in the text, and therefore, it **exists** in the mind. And because of that, the objects have no utility other than as symbols and metaphors and as reference for how Israel encountered God in antiquity. How Israel **built its relationship with God** - if the mishkan is about **Covenant**. Or how Israel continually **repaired its relationship with God** - if the mishkan is about **Atonement**. Shabbat Shalom!

<sup>1</sup> ואיש נבוב ילכב ועיר פרא אדם יולד. **A hollow man will get understanding, when a wild ass is born a man.** (Job 11:12),  
<sup>2</sup> Based on the estimate that 1 cubit = 1.5 feet. The volume of the altar would have been 5 x 5 x 3 or 75 cubic cubits. 1 cubic cubit = 1.5 x 1.5 x 1.5 or 3.375 cubic feet. The volume of the altar would have been 75 cubic cubits x 3.375 cubic feet/cubic cubit, or 253.125 cubic feet. Wood weighs 96.3 lb/cubic foot. So the total weight of the altar if it were completely made of wood would be ~24,376 lbs. or just over 12 tons! How many people would it take to lift that? My guess: close to 500.  
<sup>3</sup> "אש תמיד תוקד" - Lev. 6:6 **A regular fire is to be kept-blazing on the altar—it is not to go out!**