

Tetzaveh: The Places of Meeting

Rabbi Eliot Malomet February 28, 2026 11 Adar 5786 Shabbat Zachor

The Hebrew name for the Tabernacle is **אהל מועד - Ohel Mo'ed**. **Ohel** means tent. **Mo'ed** means meeting. Put them together and you get **Tent of Meeting**. Beyond the rituals, furnishings, and sacrifices, beyond the song, smoke and incense, **the main purpose of the Ohel Mo'ed was to be the place where God and Israel would meet.**

The Torah specifies two different meeting points within the **Ohel Mo'ed**. The first is above the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. The second is at the entrance to the entire structure. In both cases the Torah uses the same word **וְנִוְעַדְתִּי - I will meet** to indicate that these places were to serve as the meeting points.

In parashat Terumah (last week's parasha) we read:

וְנָתַתְּ אֶת הַכַּפֹּרֶת עַל הָאָרוֹן מִלְמַעְלָה וְאֶל הָאָרוֹן תָּתֵן אֶת הָעֵדוּת אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְנוּ אֵלֶיךָ. וְנִוְעַדְתִּי לָּךְ שָׁם וְדִבַּרְתִּי אִתְּךָ מֵעַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת מִבֵּינֵינוּ שְׁנֵי הַכְּרֻבִים אֲשֶׁר עַל אַרְוֹן הָעֵדוּת אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר אֶצְוֶה אוֹתָךְ אֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

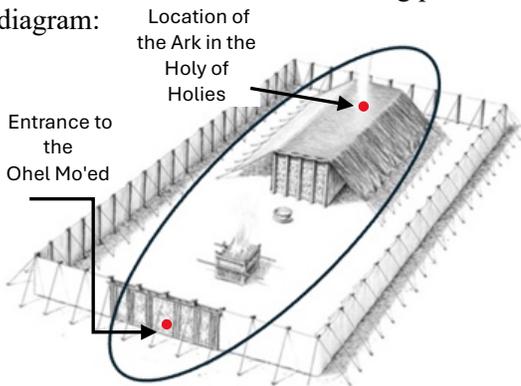
You are to put the cover (kapporet) on the Ark, above it, and in the Ark you are to put the Testimony that I give you. I will meet with you there and I will speak with you from above the cover, (kapporet) from between the keruvim that are on the Ark of Testimony— all that I command you concerning the Children of Israel. (Exod. 25:21-22)

Towards the end of this week's parasha we read:

עֲלֵת תְּמִיד לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לִפְנֵי ה' אֲשֶׁר אֹנֵד לָכֶם שָׁמָּה לְדַבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ שָׁם. וְנִוְעַדְתִּי שָׁמָּה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנִקְדַּשׁ בְּכַבְדִּי.

...a regular offering-up (this refers to the daily sacrifice), throughout your generations, at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, before the presence of God; for I will meet with you there, to speak to you there. So I will meet there with the Children of Israel, and it will be hallowed by my Glory. (Exod. 29:42-43)

We can illustrate these two meeting points with this diagram:



Thus, the Tent of Meeting functions like an ellipse - "a closed curve where the sum of the distances

from the two **focus points** inside the curve to every point on the curve is constant." Which is fascinating.

These two **focus points** function in two very different ways. The first allows for a more private, intimate meeting between God and Moses. That meeting is located in the innermost zone of the Holy of Holies, at the infinitesimal dot of space between the **keruvim** above the Ark cover (depicted in this illustration as a sphere of light between the



keruvim). And the function of the second place is to allow God and Israel to meet at the boundary of the Tent and the world, a much more public setting.

A few contemporary analogies are in order: The Throne Room at Buckingham Palace (below) functions like the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle.¹ While today it mostly has a ceremonial function, originally the Throne Room was



where the sovereign consulted with his or her closest advisors and where pronouncements were made. However, when the King or Queen wanted to



meet the public they would stand on the balcony of the Palace (above). This would take place at great occasions such as royal weddings, coronations, or, in one of the most celebrated instances, on V-E Day at the end of WWII where throngs of people gathered outside the palace and King George VI appeared on the balcony with his family to greet them.



(Queen Elizabeth famously recalled how she and her sister Margaret slipped out of the palace that night to mingle with the crowds incognito.)

¹ This analogy is not farfetched. There is a rather fascinating and convincing argument that the layout of the Tabernacle is in fact an Israelite adaptation of the portable Egyptian throne room. See Michael Homan's article in TheTorah.com in which he describes how similar the Tabernacle layout was

to the royal tent camp of Rameses II. <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-tabernacle-in-its-ancient-near-eastern-context>. This is an important motif also in the Scroll of Esther which we are going to read next week. See Esther 5:1.

In the US, the President conducts important consultations in the Oval Office, the political Holy of Holies, and major convocations such as the inauguration, take place at west front of the US Capitol, *the entrance of the House of Congress, i.e. the boundary between the Congress and the world.* In Canada ceremonial private consultations take place at the Governor General's residence in Rideau Hall (in Ottawa), while the main public convocations on



Parliament Hill *near the main entrance of the Parliament Buildings.*

In Israel, private consultations take place in Prime Minister's Office, and public convocations take place at the Knesset Plaza. In other words, to state the obvious, private deliberations between the heads of state and their closest advisors, take place in inner sancta, and public declarations, convocations, and rallies take place in public squares adjacent to the seat of power. *In the desert Tabernacle, God met Moses privately in the Holy of Holies and also met the Children of Israel at a large area adjacent to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.*

The tension between the private/intimate and the public/general is a big theme in Judaism. A favorite illustration of this is the first verse of Psalm 150:

הללו יה ה' הללו אל בקדשו	הללוהו ברקיע עזו.
Halleluyah! Praise God in his holy abode!	Praise God in the sky, the divine stonghold!

In the first half, we imagine the intimate private space, the Holy of Holies, and in the second half we imagine the vast reaches of the universe. When worshipers recite this verse, they toggle from one to the other, often not even realizing how profound that verse is. For our ancestors it would have been amazing to sing this psalm in the courtyard of the Temple, looking first at the sacred area, and then casting one's eyes to a beautiful blue sky above, gazing at God's heavenly abode. However, when we, who live thousands of years after the destruction of the Temple, say this, we have to go deep inside ourselves, *to our own personal Holy of Holies* and establish our own experience of closeness to God. And when we say, *Praise God in the sky*, we, who are aware that the universe is 13.8 billion years old and 93.8 billion light-years in diameter, can't begin to fathom who and what we are. What would God want from us? *In the first iteration we are in a place above the keruvim in the Holy of Holies; in the second we are at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. In the first, we imagine ourselves to be the sole concern of God; in the second, we imagine ourselves as smaller than a speck of dust in the vastness of time and space. Jewish spiritual*

expression toggles between an awareness of both of those realms, the infinite and the infinitesimal.

All of the ritual events in the Temple took place in silence.² Priests worshiped in silence in the inner holy areas; but the outer courtyards where everyone else worshiped were the settings of cacophonous sounds, prayer, music, song and dance. This coexistence expressed the polarity between the private and public realms. The content of the worship experience in both of those realms was different. A vestige of that tension exists in traditional Jewish worship to this day. *When we recite the Silent Amidah, we are at our own Holy of Holies. It is meant to be recited in silence because at its core, it is a re-enactment of the priestly worship of the kohanim, which was conducted in silence in the holy areas. The repetition of the Amidah re-enacts the worship of the people in the courtyards.* The Hazzan sets the prayers to music inviting the participation of the congregation. Therefore, the content and the experience of the Silent Amidah and the Repetition are totally different. It is the private versus the public; the grandeur of the universe versus the austere simplicity of the intimate infinitesimal space above the Ark of the Covenant.

We find a similar dynamic playing out in the extraordinary debates between Hillel and Shammai, the two great pillars of rabbinic Judaism. Hillel was a populist, Shammai an elitist. If the object of the religious experience was to be close to God, for Hillel it was to experience that closeness within the normal rhythms of life; and for Shammai it was to experience that closeness outside the normal rhythms of life in a sacred realm onto itself. To use our metaphorical language: *Hillel wanted to live out his religious experience at the entrance to Tent of Meeting and Shammai, in the Holy of Holies.* To illustrate: *According to Hillel, one can recite the Sh'ma in any posture. But according to Shammai in the evening a person should recite the Shema lying down while in the morning one should recite it standing up.* Both cite וּבְקוּמְךָ וּבְשׁוּכְךָ -when you lie down and when you get up (Deut. 6:7) to prove their point. Shammai says: this refers to *how you should say it*; Hillel says: this refers to *when you should say it*. But here's the point: *Saying the Sh'ma is about accepting the kingship of God. Shammai: To accept the kingship of God we must suspend everything we are doing and enter that experience with the appropriate awe and reverence that it demands - like entering the Holy of Holies.*

Hillel: No. Everything in life has the potential of being holy. We don't have to step outside of our normal lives to do this. Metaphorically, we do not need to enter the Holy of Holies. For us, it is good enough to be at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, that is to say, anywhere.

Lots to think about, as usual.

Shabbat Shalom! And Happy Purim!

This parasha sheet is sponsored by Suzy Levin to commemorate the yahrzeit of her father, Joseph Levin z'l.

² Israel Knohl, The Divine Symphony. Philadelphia: JPS, 2003.