

Terumah: At Home with God and Half an Ark **Rabbanit Michal Kohane, Class of 2020**

When my kids were younger, we used to read—over and over again—the famous story about six blind men and an elephant, all standing around the huge animal in an effort to “see” it, each arguing that the part of the elephant that s/he is touching is the elephant itself. I think of the elephant often as a metaphor for our relationship with the Divine. As much as we like, each of us is not able to perceive the whole. We, who are bound by time and space cannot perceive a Being who is beyond our limitations. It's not only that God is truth and kindness and strength all at once but also holds complete opposites like good *and* bad all at once!

Abraham is often described as the first monotheist. Then again, Adam and Noah also knew that it is the One God who speaks to them. Rav Adin Steinsaltz suggests that people start out as monotheists but then, in an effort to capture God's image, begin breaking down the incomprehensible idea into pieces, creating a God of war and a God of peace, a God of fertility and creation, and a God of death and destruction. This, in turn, created different ways of understanding as well as worship, begetting different relationships with God. The Torah's greatness is not only teaching the Oneness of God, but offering a system that can hold on and maintain that idea.

And yet our forefathers each had their unique relationship with Hashem. The daily *Amidah* prayer opens with the words: “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob.” Why not just say, “God of Abraham”? Or “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”? Why such a long and repetitive reference to God? Perhaps exactly because while it's the same “Elephant”—the same God—each one saw God differently.

The Talmud (Pesachim 88a) tells us:

Rabbi Elazar said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “And many peoples shall go and say: Go and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths” (Isaiah 2:3)? The Gemara notes that Jacob is the only Patriarch mentioned and asks: Is He the God of Jacob and not the God of Abraham and Isaac?

Rather, the verse specifically mentions Jacob to allude to the fact that the Temple will ultimately be described in the same way that Jacob referred to it. It will not be referred to as it was referred to by Abraham. It is written of him that when he prayed at the



8 Adar 1 5784 | February 17, 2024

location of the Temple mountain, he called it mount, as it is stated: “As it is said on this day: On the mount where the Lord is seen” (Genesis 22:14). And it will not be referred to as it was referred to by Isaac. It is written of him that he called the location of the Temple field when he prayed there, as it is stated: “And Isaac went out to meditate in the field” (Genesis 24:63). Rather, it will be described as it was referred to by Jacob, who called it house, as it is stated: “And he called the name of that place Beth-El” (Genesis 28:19), which means house of God.

Each had a special place. Abraham and Isaac’s places are “natural”—a mountain and a field, seemingly more “godly” and everlasting. Indeed, those are still wonderful and we know we can often feel the “wow” of the Divine when we go out into nature. And yet, here it turns out that Jacob’s place, a home, will be the one which stays with us. It is the topic of this week’s Torah portion of Terumah, building the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle, a home for Hashem.

This sounds strange: God needs a home? In our *parsha* we read: “And let them make **me** a sanctuary that I may dwell among **them**” (Exodus 25:8). Of course, God does not need a home but we do. If we take the time to work, give from ourselves and create a space for God in our lives, the Divine Presence will reside, not in it, but among us.

In the Pesach Haggadah it says, “*Barukh HaMakom*, Blessed is the place—blessed is He, blessed is He who gave the Torah to his people Israel—blessed is He.” We could have thought that the “*Makom*” and the One who gives us the Torah are two different gods but not so. It is the same, one and only God. Sometimes God decides to be the one who speaks to us directly, and sometimes, God decides to be “the place,” nature, the world, and physical things around us. The *Mishkan* wants to bring it all together. It is a place to remember God’s different parts, on heaven and on earth; a traveling home for Hashem, to dwell, not in it, but among us.

In order to achieve this goal, nothing about this structure is a coincidence—its size, colors, or materials. So when the ark measures “two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high” (Exodus 25:10), it is not because that’s what happens to fit in a particular corner. So we wonder, what is the meaning of the ark’s measurements that they are all in “halves”?

R. Mordechai Yosef Leiner (1801-1854,) in his Hasidic commentary *The Mei Hashilo’ach*, explains that the ark’s measures are purposefully all in halves to remind us that in order to acquire words of Torah, we have to be aware that we are lacking them; that we too are “halves” like the ark. Only when we are fully aware that we are incomplete, will we be able to make space for God and His Torah. God’s home therefore, is a place not for Him, but for us to be reminded of our need to work, give, and bring him into our lives. Shabbat Shalom.



8 Adar 1 5784 | February 17, 2024

Rabbanit Michal Kohane was a long-time leader and educator in Northern California, serving as rabbi, Federation executive director, and more. Rabbanit Michal holds a BA in Studies of Israel and Education, an MS in Jewish Studies, an MA in Clinical Psychology, and a PsyD in organizational psychology. Her first novel, Hachug ("Extracurricular") was published in Israel by Steimatzky and her weekly blog about Torah, travel and life can be found at www.miko284.com. Rabbanit Michal Kohane continues to be a teacher of Torah and Talmud in Israel.