

Growing Up in the Shadow of God

Parashat Vayikra – Rav Hanan Schlesinger

A grand, imposing edifice dedicated to the One Almighty God. It towered over all the other buildings of Jerusalem, as if almost reaching up to heaven. It has been said that he who has not seen the glory of the Second Temple as reconstructed by King Herod has never seen beauty in his life.

The Holy Temple in Jerusalem, destroyed almost two thousand years ago, as well as its prototype the desert Tabernacle, which we have been reading about in the past weeks' Torah portion and which constitutes the main theme of the Book of Leviticus which we commence reading this Shabbat, both inspire awe. They lift our thoughts to He Who is Beyond and connect us to God's overpowering presence. But there may be more, much more, to it than that.

Paradoxically, there is a stream of thought in our tradition that may locate the meaning of the Tabernacle and the Temple not so much in the power of the experience they create for those who enter therein or even for those who gather round about, but rather in how they alter the experience of God for those who remain far away.

The Divine Presence which reveals itself in the Tabernacle and Temple can be understood as a concentration of Transcendent Energy. However, we are reminded by Rabbi Mordechai Leiner of Izbitch in his groundbreaking work of Hasidic homilies, Mei haShiloach, that there is a flip side to this concept of the concentration of Divinity in one place. For there to be a special focus in one place, there must be a corresponding contraction from all other places. One of the purposes of the Tabernacle, he intimates, is the delineation and constriction of God's Commanding Presence to one place so that It be restricted from all other places. God allows Himself to be directly experienced in one locale in order to allow Himself to be perceived as hidden in all others.

And why does God need to hide Himself, as it were? Because He must allow us room to grow. Just as parents must slowly recede into the background as their children get older so as to allow



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them to mature and come into their own, so God must 'let go' and allow man to be free to express himself.

Too concentrated an experience of God, overly intense manifestations of God, stifle man. In Egypt our forefathers witnessed the ten plagues and then the splitting of the Sea of Reeds. At Mt. Sinai they stood facing the smoking, trembling mountain with the fearsome ball of fire at its summit, quaking as they heard the Divine Voice. Under such circumstances man may be obedient and he may even be inspired, but he is hardly free. The miracles and the experience of the Divine Presence are coercive. There is little room for man to explore the recesses of his or her own creativity and talents, and to learn how these can be harnessed for the greater good and for the glory of God.

In a room of blinding light, man sees only darkness. In a world that is full of God, man paradoxically may not fully experience, and certainly will not fully appreciate, what life in God's presence can really mean.

Only that which we find ourselves is truly ours, only that which we struggle for and grapple with is fully absorbed into our personalities. Therefore, God must hide so man can search for him. He must distance Himself and contract Himself so as to create a path for man to traverse. God seems to want us to embark on a journey towards Him, each of us on a slightly different path, as befitting the kaleidoscope of our latent talents and propensities.

So think of the Tabernacle as the beginning of a process in which God retreats into His castle, like a proud parent, who, however hesitantly, knows it is time for his children to spread their wings.



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