

And I Shall Dwell Among Them: The Mishkan as a Microcosm of the Human Condition

Four Torah portions are devoted to the construction of the Mishkan (Tabernacle). *Parashot Terumah* and *Tezavveh* (Ex. 25:1-30:10) inventory the materials required, while *Parashot Vayakhel* and *Pekudei* (Ex. 35-40) provide a record of the task's completion, including a reckoning of the supplies used. The points of correlation between the two accountings both reinforce their similarities and highlight their differences.

This article presents a holistic framework for integrating the Torah's two presentations of the Mishkan project. The suggested framework provides a comprehensive explanation for the distinctions, utilizing them to identify the overall message and thrust of the Torah portions. I will suggest that the Torah's two complementary yet divergent accounts of the Mishkan construction are inversely parallel to the two Genesis creation narratives. The first creation story corresponds to *Vayakhel-Pekudei* while the second correlates with *Terumah-Tezavveh*. The chiasmic-like relationship between Genesis' telling and retelling of humanity's creation, and Exodus' telling and retelling of the Mishkan's construction reflects a fundamental dichotomy inherent in humanity's

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religious experience.¹ Understanding the Torah's two descriptions of the Mishkan's construction as part of a broader meditation on the conflicting Genesis stories of the creation of humanity creates a holistic framework for understanding their subtle differences, while pointing to the unified compositional strategy of the entire Torah. The Torah portions recounting the Mishkan construction emerge as a unified exposition on the wider implications of the creation of humanity.

The Telos of the Mishkan

Parashat Terumah opens with the construction of the *aron* (ark) and its attendant *keruvim* (cherubs). This in effect places the *aron* at the center of the Mishkan's theological universe, with the rest of the holy vessels as constellations in its orbit. The *keruvim* that guarded the *aron*, served as a conduit for the divine voice, which emanated from between their embrace (Ex. 25:22). The role of the *aron*, as presented in *Terumah*, reflects the investiture of God's presence in the Mishkan as the telos of the Mishkan project: "Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them" (ibid. 25:8).

The conspicuous reversal of the order in *Parashat Vayakhel*—with the Mishkan structure presented first, followed by the vessels—did not escape the notice of the Sages. They understood Bezalel, the chief artisan of the Mishkan, to have had superior intuition to Moses in matters pertaining to the implementation of the Mishkan's construction plans (*Berakhot* 55a).² An attuned reading of the language used to describe the Mishkan edifice will illuminate the theological implications of *Vayakhel's* presentation of the Mishkan: that it is the structure, as opposed to the *aron ha-berit* (ark of the covenant), that forms the crux of the Mishkan's theological universe.

The Mishkan as a Metaphor for Creation

The Mishkan edifice rested upon support beams. The Torah's peculiar choice of words for describing these support beams in both *Terumah* and

1. A chiasm is a literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order. I use the phrase "chiastic-like" to describe the inverse relationship between the Torah portions describing the creation and the Mishkan, as not *all* elements of the two are mirrored in the text.

2. Cf. Rashi, Ex. 38:22.

Vayakhel demands our attention, as they exhibit the distinctive quality of simultaneously referencing human anatomy. The Mishkan beams are described as featuring a head (*rosh*), a hairline (*pe'ah*),³ a side-chamber (*zela*),⁴ hands (*shetei yadot*), and legs/thighs (*yerekh*) (ibid. 26:15-27; 36:20-32). The anthropomorphic description of the beams is topped off with the instruction to use “standing acacia wood,” *azei shittim omedim*, for their construction (ibid. 26:15).⁵ It should be noted that although this form of imagery is utilized on an individual basis in the descriptions of other Mishkan vessels, it is specifically within the context of the Mishkan beams that all of these lexical units combine, forming a complete set. If one were to draw a crude picture based on this unique collection of terms, the result would bear an uncanny resemblance to an erect human being.

Further indicators of the deliberate anthropomorphic depiction of the Mishkan structure are the portrayal of the pegs that protruded from the beams as a woman facing her sister, “*ishah el ahotah*” (ibid. 26:17) and the description of the two corner beams as twins, “*te'omim*” (ibid. 26:24; 36:29).⁶

Based on this, we can argue that the dichotomy present in the Torah's two divergent accounts of the Mishkan's construction portrays humanity in opposing roles. The *Terumah-Tezavveh* account, which opens with the *aron* and presents the Temple frame almost as an afterthought to its vessels, points to God's presence as the focal point of the Temple universe. The unit *Vayakhel-Pekudei*, on the other hand, commences with a depiction of the Mishkan edifice, supported by an erect human-like frame, suggesting that humanity's role is literally and figuratively at the foundation of the Mishkan enterprise.

The tension inherent in these diametrically opposed worldviews brings to mind the two Genesis accounts of the creation of the first man and woman. Like *Vayakhel-Pekudei's* emphasis on the fundamental role of humanity, the first creation account describes humanity as the final product of creation and the pinnacle of God's handiwork. This contrasts

3. Cf. L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, M.E.J. Richardson, and J.J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (hereafter, HALOT) (Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000), “*pe'ah*,” 907–08.

4. HALOT, “*zela*,” 1030.

5. The other Mishkan vessels were made from standard acacia wood. Feliks identifies the “standing acacia” as *Acacia albida* or “whitish acacia.” See Yehuda Feliks, *Nature and Man in the Bible: Chapters in Biblical Ecology* (London: Soncino, 1981), 20–23.

6. Cf. HALOT, “*te'omim*,” 1694.

with the second creation account, in which the creation of the first human being does not represent God's final creative act. Furthermore, man's given role in that story as caretaker of the garden (Gen. 2:15, 19) would seem to give him subordinate status.

The parallel theme of humanity's conflicting role in the Mishkan project and the Genesis creation narrative is especially interesting in light of a *midrash* that correlates the fashioning of the Mishkan as described in *Pekudei* with God's creation of the world:

Why does it say, "O Lord, I love your abode and the place of your glory" (Ps. 26:8)? For it [the Mishkan] is equivalent to the creation of the world (*Tanḥuma, Pekudei 2*).

Franz Rosenzweig observes that there are seven lexical points of contact between the Genesis creation story and the Mishkan construction account in *Pekudei*.⁷ Most notable are his observations regarding the resonances between the Mishkan's completion and the consecration of the Sabbath day:

So all the work on the Mishkan, the Tent of Meeting, was completed (*va-tekhel*). The Israelites did everything just as the LORD commanded Moses. (Ex. 39:32)

Moses inspected the work and saw (*va-yar*) that they had done it just as the Lord had commanded. So Moses blessed (*va-yevarekh*) them. (Ibid. 39:43)

God saw (*va-yar*) all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed (*va-yekhullu*), in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished (*va-yekhal*) the work He had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed (*va-yevarekh*) the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all the work of creating that He had done. (Gen. 1:31-2:1-3)⁸

The numerous correlations between the creation account and the Mishkan material point us in the direction of the Genesis creation narrative in our pursuit of a holistic approach to the contrasting Mishkan construction accounts.

7. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *D. Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin: Schocken, 1936), 39-42, 116-17.

8. The strong textual correlation between the creation and Mishkan accounts lends insight into the rationale behind the linking of the thirty-nine categories of forbidden work on the Sabbath with the essential activities involved in the Mishkan construction (*Shabbat* 49b). See our discussion below regarding the Sabbath in the parallel accounts.

Adam I and Adam II

In his seminal essay, "The Lonely Man of Faith," R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik examines the two seemingly incompatible Genesis accounts of humanity's creation.⁹ R. Soloveitchik speaks of Adam the first (henceforth Adam I) in the first creation account and of Adam the second (henceforth Adam II) in the second as archetypes of humanity's conflicted nature.

Adam I is the product of God's final creative act, the pinnacle of creation, "majestic man." The seventh day is blessed and consecrated following his creation. Adam I is charged with directing all of his energy, his very being, toward the mastering of his environment. Adam II, on the other hand, marks the beginning of the creative process. He is the keeper of the garden, in perpetual search of God's presence. R. Soloveitchik attributes these discrepancies to the tension that characterizes the human condition:

The Biblical dialectic stems from the fact that Adam the first, majestic man of dominion and success, and Adam the second, the lonely man of faith, obedience and defeat, are not two different people locked in an external confrontation as in an "I" opposed a "thou," but one person who is involved in self confrontation.¹⁰

The existential dichotomy inherent in the human condition, which is expressed in the two divergent creation reports, is directly relevant to the two accounts of the Mishkan construction and their implications for humanity's religious experience. The Adam I narrative can be examined in light of the parallels to the Mishkan construction as presented in *Vayakhel-Pekudei*, while the Adam II material can be analyzed in light of its relationship with *Terumah-Tezavveh*.

The inversion of the parallel between the two Mishkan construction accounts and the two Genesis creation accounts suggests deliberate

9. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition* 7 (1965): 5-67; see also *Berakhot* 61a; *Ketuvot* 8a; *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* 1:24; Nahmanides, Gen. 2:7; and *Kuzari* 4:3, which address the incongruity of the two biblical creation accounts. R. Soloveitchik rejects the theories suggested by Bible critics, who attribute the two accounts to two different sources, suggesting that they ignored the essential content and message of the biblical story.

10. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," 54. Cf. Erich Fromm, *On Being Human* (London: Continuum, 1997), 75. Fromm also views humanity's essential condition to be an existential dichotomy:

It is precisely one of a contradiction between man as an animal who is within nature and between man as the only thing in nature that has awareness of itself. Hence, man can be aware of his separateness and lostness and weakness. Hence, man has to find new ways of union with nature and with his fellow man.

internal referencing, in accordance with the “biblical inverted quotation” documented by P.C. Beentjes.¹¹ This principle describes the way in which the Bible inverts quotations from earlier canonical texts in a chiasmic way.¹²

Divine Presence

Probably the most commented-upon variance between the two Mishkan accounts relates to *Terumah-Tezavveh*'s description of the golden altar (*mizbah ha-zahav*) apart from the rest of the sanctuary vessels (Ex. 30:1-10) and after the concluding verses of the unit (ibid. 29:45-46). In *Vayakhel-Pekudei*, in contrast, the golden altar is presented together with the rest of the sanctuary vessels (ibid. 37:25-29; 39:38; 40:26).

Naḥmanides attributes this discrepancy to the unique role of the golden altar in preventing the spread of plague, which only became relevant following the sin of the golden calf described in *Parashat Ki Tissa*. Hizkuni posits that the unusual placement of the golden altar in *Terumah-Tezavveh* emphasizes the prohibition against its misuse for general sacrificial offerings. Seforno proposes that whereas the function of the *menorah* and the *shulḥan* (table) was to *invite* God's presence, the role of the golden altar was to *receive* God's presence once it had arrived.¹³ The suggestion that I offer here is not meant to counter these explanations, but rather to add insight to the discussion.

One of the features common to the *aron ha-berit*, the *shulḥan*, and the *menorah* was the quality of “facing,” expressed in the root *PNH*.¹⁴ The cover of the *aron* was fashioned from a solid piece of gold, connecting it to the *keruvim*, which faced each other: “*u-feneihem ish el ahiv*” (ibid. 25:20). The *shulḥan* was perpetually laden with showbread, “*leḥem ha-panim*,” which functioned as an integral part of that vessel (ibid. 25:30), and the *menorah* was lit in such a way as to shine upon its face or front, “*ve-he'ir al ever paneha*” (ibid. 25:37). The emphasis on the word *panim* that these vessels share is indicative of their

11. P.C. Beentjes, “Discovering a New Path of Intertextuality: Inverted Quotations and Their Dynamics,” in L. J. de Regt et al. (ed.), *Literary Structure and Rhetorical Strategies in the Hebrew Bible* (Assen: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 31-50.

12. This phenomenon has been further documented in Isaiah's inverted quotations from Psalms. Cf. Moshe Seidel, “Resemblances Between the Book of Isaiah and the Book of Psalms” (Hebrew), *Sinai Yarḥon* 19 (1955-1956): 149-72, 229-40, 273-80, 333-53.

13. Cf. Naḥmanides, Hizkuni, and Seforno on Ex. 30:1.

14. HALOT, “PNH,” 938-9.

common role in inviting the divine presence. The *aron* was a conduit for divine communication, the illumination of the *menorah* represented spiritual enlightenment, and the *shulḥan* with its showbread facilitated communion between God and human beings.

Unlike the other sanctuary vessels, however, the golden altar is not described as embodying the aspect of “facing.” Although the root *PNH* appears in the description of the placement of the golden altar—describing its location opposite the veil, “*lifnei ha-parokhet*” (ibid. 30:6), which is under discussion in the context—it does not appear in the description of the vessel itself. The subtle variation in the use of the root *PNH* in the context of the golden altar supports the overall approach of the commentators cited above: The function of the golden altar was fundamentally different than that of the other sanctuary vessels.

Interestingly, the emphasis on God’s presence, crucial to *Terumah*’s presentation of the Mishkan, is not present in *Vayakhel*. There (ibid. 30:10–29), the recounting of the fashioning of the *menorah*, the *shulḥan*, and the golden altar fails to mention the term *panim*.¹⁵

The emphasis on God’s presence in *Terumah* is especially interesting in light of its correlation with Adam II and his insatiable yearning for God’s presence. After eating from the forbidden fruit, Adam II becomes distraught and feels compelled to hide from God’s face, “*mippenei Hashem*” (Gen. 3:8). The trajectory of sin continues in Genesis 4, with the murder of Abel and the casting out of Cain from God’s presence, “*u-mi-panekha essater*” (ibid. 4:14).

Furthermore, in *Terumah*, the *keruvim*—who are described as facing each other, “*u-feneihem ish el ahiv*” (Ex. 25:20)—are assigned the role of serving as the conduits for the divine voice (ibid. 25:22). This suggests a rectification of the menacing mandate of Eden’s guardian *keruvim*, who prevent humanity’s return to the garden (Gen. 3:24).¹⁶ *Terumah*’s description of the voice of God emanating from between the *keruvim* harks back to Eden, where God’s voice resonated clearly and palpably (ibid. 3:8).

15. It should be noted that the showbread, *leḥem ha-panim*, is mentioned together with the instruction to fashion the table in 35:13. Cf. Lev. 24:1–9, where the *menorah* and *shulḥan* are again discussed. There, the term “*lifnei Hashem*,” “before God,” is used to describe the position of the *menorah* and the *shulḥan*, as opposed to describing the vessels themselves. Additionally, the showbread is referred to there simply as loaves, “*ḥalot*,” as opposed to *leḥem ha-panim*. This contrasts with the centrality of the term *panim* in the context of the *menorah* and *shulḥan* in *Terumah*.

16. Menahem ben Benjamin Recanati (1223–1290), in his commentary on Gen. 3:24, quotes from a *midrash* that is no longer extant that suggests that the *keruvim* of the Mishkan were representations of the *keruvim* in the Garden of Eden.

God's discernible presence in the Adam II narrative is expounded upon by R. Soloveitchik:

The Biblical metaphor referring to God breathing life into Adam alludes to the actual preoccupation of the latter with God, to his genuine living experience of God, rather than to some divine potential or endowment in Adam symbolized by *imago Dei*. Adam the second lives in close union with God. His existential "I" experience is interwoven in the awareness of communing with the Great Self whose footprints he discovers along the many tortuous paths of creation.¹⁷

God's call to Adam in the Garden of Eden, "*Ayekah*," "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9), which went unanswered in Genesis, is ultimately responded to in the book of Exodus through Israel's alacrity in procuring the necessary materials for the Mishkan's construction (Ex. 36:5-7). Israel's energetic response to God's mandate—"Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them" (ibid. 25:8; 29:45)—is a reciprocal expression of their seeking out of God's presence. As noted above, this formulation of God's desire to dwell among humanity appears exclusively in the *Parashot* of *Terumah* and *Tezavveh*.

Priestly Vestments

This understanding of *Vayakhel-Pekudei* as a metaphoric re-creation of the once unblemished world of Adam I and *Terumah-Tezavveh* as a reclamation of the divine presence experienced by Adam II in the Garden of Eden adds insight to the Torah's descriptions of Aaron's vestments.

Like the tunic (*kotnot or*) donned by Adam following his sin (Gen. 3:21), the essential priestly garment was the full body garment (*ketonet*) (Ex. 29:8-9; Lev. 16:3-4). But although Aaron's vestments are described in *Tezavveh* and again in *Vayakhel-Pekudei*, it is only in *Tezavveh* that the text explicitly stipulates by each individual vestment that it was to be worn upon entering the sanctuary (*ha-kodesh*) before God (*lifnei Hashem*) (Ex. 28:29-30, 35, 38, 43). Furthermore, only *Tezavveh* relates that the priestly undergarments served the function of covering nakedness (ibid. 28:42), bringing to mind Adam II and his sudden awareness of his nakedness (Gen. 3:10-11).

Adam II was expelled from the garden following his sin, his re-admittance barred by menacing *keruvim* stationed along the return path (Gen. 3:24). Humanity's expulsion from God's presence is

17. Soloveitchik, "Lonely Man of Faith," 17-18.

metaphorically rectified in the Mishkan through the priestly investiture rite recounted in *Tezavveh*. The ceremony featured Aaron and his sons firmly ensconced within the Mishkan's entrance gate (Ex. 29), against the backdrop of its *keruvim*-adorned curtains (Ex. 26:1).

The Women's Role

The approach we have advanced, in which the Torah's two accounts of the Mishkan project are inverse reflections of the two Genesis creation accounts, draws further support from the way in which it resolves other core discrepancies, such as the role of women in the construction of the Mishkan. The full and active role played by the women in the Mishkan construction in *Vayakhel-Pekudei*¹⁸ stands in stark contrast to the presentation in *Terumah-Tezavveh*, which is completely silent on the subject. Indeed, the repeated emphasis on the active participation of the women in *Vayakhel-Pekudei* is highly atypical of the biblical text in general. The overall sense that one gets is that the text in *Vayakhel-Pekudei* is doing more than merely chronicling events; it is conveying something fundamental about women's egalitarian role in the Mishkan project. The women's equal status in *Vayakhel-Pekudei* correlates well with woman's simultaneous creation with Adam I and with her role in Genesis 1 as a full and equal partner.

The Sabbath Day

Another core discrepancy between the two Mishkan accounts that may be explained through the prism of the creation theme is the emphasis placed on the Sabbath. Adam I is closely connected with the sanctification of the Sabbath day (Gen. 2:1-3), which is the climax of the creation story in general and the culmination of the creation of humanity in particular. The close relationship between humanity and the Sabbath day is clearly articulated in the Decalogue, which categorically states that humanity's obligation to rest on the seventh day is a direct corollary of God's having rested on the seventh day of creation (Ex. 20:8-10). Indeed, the very notion of the sanctification of the Sabbath day can be rendered meaningful only insofar as humanity is devoted to the preservation of the day's sanctity.

Whereas *Vayakhel* commences with the sanctification of the Sabbath day (Ex. 35:1-3), the Sabbath is notably absent from *Terumah* and *Tezavveh*. The command to refrain from building the Mishkan on the

18. See Ex. 35:21-29; 36:6; 38:8; cf. Rashi 38:8.

Sabbath was in effect the means through which the Sabbath was installed into the framework of the Mishkan as a microcosm of creation.¹⁹ It is noteworthy that whereas the term *melakhah*, work, closely associated with the Sabbath day,²⁰ appears a total of twenty-one times in *Vayakhel-Pekudei*, it is entirely absent from *Terumah-Tezavveh*.²¹ Furthermore, we may view the dramatic refrain that serves as a consistent backdrop to *Vayakhel-Pekudei*—that Israel did “as the Lord commanded Moses”—as parallel to the notion of creation via Divine command, which punctuates the first chapter of Genesis.²²

Conclusion

The Torah’s two accounts of the Mishkan’s construction may be viewed through the prism of the Genesis creation narratives, from which they emerge as inversely parallel. The first creation story may be understood to correspond with *Vayakhel* and *Pekudei*, and the second to correlate with *Terumah* and *Tezavveh*. Understanding the Torah’s two expositions of the Mishkan’s construction as a broad meditation on the conflicting stories of humanity’s creation in Genesis does more than provide us with a framework for being able to evaluate the variances between the two Mishkan accounts. This phenomenon provides valuable insight into the unified compositional strategy of the entire Torah. The chiasmic-like relationship between, on the one hand, the Genesis telling and retelling of humanity’s creation and, on the other hand, the Exodus telling and retelling of the Mishkan’s construction reflects a fundamental dichotomy inherent in the human condition. The Torah’s dialectical reflection on humanity’s role gets to the heart of what it means to be human.

R. Soloveitchik writes:

The man of faith, animated by his great experience, is able to reach the point at which not only his logic of the mind but even his logic of the heart and of the will, everything—even his own “I” awareness—has to give in to an “absurd” commitment. The man of faith is “insanely” committed to and “madly” in love with God.²³

19. Cf. *Tanḥuma, Pekudei 2; Bereshit Rabbah, Bereshit 10*.

20. Cf. Gen. 2:2, 3; Ex. 20:10; *Shabbat 7:2*.

21. Ex. 35:21, 24, 29, 30, 31, 33, 35; 36:1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8; 38:24; 39:43; 40:43. Note also the significance of the number twenty-one, seven times three.

22. Cf. *Avot 5:1*.

23. Soloveitchik, “The Lonely Man of Faith,” 61.

Humanity's intense desire for a relationship with God, which began at the moment of his creation, found its ultimate expression in the Mishkan, where the divine presence was invited to dwell among human beings. But in the varying accounts of the Mishkan's construction, humanity plays two diametrically opposed roles. *Terumah* and *Tezavveh* portray humanity in a state of eternal yearning for God's presence, while *Vayakhel* and *Pekudei* hint at humanity's place at the epicenter of the Mishkan, with the weight of the Mishkan structure literally and figuratively resting upon humanity's shoulders. Man and woman's contrasting roles in the two Mishkan construction accounts emerge as a reflection upon and a continuation of the dichotomy inherent in their creation.

Nahum Sarna reflects on the opening of the Torah with the Genesis creation account, observing that the creation story is far more than a discourse on the provenance of humanity:

Genesis is but a prologue to the historical drama that unfolds itself in the ensuing pages of the Bible. It proclaims, loudly and unambiguously, the absolute subordination of all creation to the supreme Creator, who thus can make use of the forces of nature to fulfill His mighty deeds in history.²⁴

The four Torah portions that recount the Mishkan construction collectively expand and expound upon the story of humanity's creation in Genesis. The human condition, which paradoxically encompasses both strong emotional attachments and debilitating existential loneliness, is reflected in the full religious experience embodied within the Mishkan. In *Terumah-Tezavveh*, humanity is secondary to God, whose presence palpably and overwhelmingly permeates the Mishkan, echoing God's pervasive presence in the Garden of Eden. In *Vayakhel-Pekudei*, humanity, like Adam the first, is elevated to the role of God's partner, poised and ready to shoulder the responsibilities of that partnership—so that, in Sarna's words, together they might “fulfill His mighty deeds in history.”

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24. Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 8-9.