

Purpose of the Mishkan

Introduction

Why Does Hashem Want a House?

The second half of Sefer Shemot revolves almost exclusively around the building of the Mishkan, with thirteen full chapters detailing its planning and implementation, interrupted only to recount the sin of the Golden Calf and its aftermath. What was the purpose of this grand edifice? At first glance, the answer appears obvious, as the framing instructions for the Tabernacle's construction create an inclusio which spotlights its role as a dwelling place for Hashem's presence:



וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשֹׁכְנֵתִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם. (כ"ה:ח')

וְשֹׁכְנֵתִי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהֵייתִי לָהֶם לֵאלֹהִים. וַיִּדְעוּ כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְשֹׁכְנֵי בְּתוֹכְכֶם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם. (כ"ט:מ"ה-מ"ו)

And they should make me a Sanctuary and I will dwell among them. (25:8)

And I will dwell among the children of Israel and I will be their God. And they will know that I am Hashem their God, who has taken them out from the land of Egypt to dwell among them, I am Hashem their God. (29:45-46)

However, these verses merely raise the question: If we assume that Hashem is not a corporal being and cannot be contained within a physical framework,¹ why does He request a finite structure to house His presence?² Moreover, why did He desire that we perform all of the Mishkan's daily rituals such as its sacrificial offerings,³ incense burning, and lamp lighting? This enigma is succinctly formulated by R. Saadia Gaon:

אולי יתמה ממעשה המשכן ויאמר: מה לבורא לאהל ולמסך, ולנרות מודלקות, ולקול נשמע לנגון, וללחם אפוי, ולריח טוב, ולמנחת סולת ויין ושמן ופירות, והדומה לזה?... כי כבר דן לו השכל שאיננו צריך אל דבר, אבל צורך הכל אליו.

And perhaps one will ask from the building of the Tabernacle, and one will say: why does the Creator need a tent and a screen, and lit candles, and a melodious voice, and baked bread, and a good smell, and a fine flour offering, and oil and fruit, and similar things?... Because the mind already ruled that he does not need a thing, but everything needs him.

What Suddenly Changed?

The command to build the Mishkan appears as something of a surprise in the context of the Israelites' trek through the Wilderness. The nation had just witnessed Hashem's revelation at Mt. Sinai which was immediately followed by a directive to build altars of earth or stone if a need should arise to offer sacrifices (Shemot 20:20-22).⁴ They had also been notified of their impending journey to the land of Israel and directed to bring the first fruits of the land to the House of Hashem (Shemot 23:19-33). But there had not even been a

hint of any need to build a temporary place of worship in the Wilderness itself. All that apparently remained before the commencement of the awaited journey to the Promised Land was for Moshe to ascend Mt. Sinai and bring down the Tablets of the Covenant.⁵

Why, then, did Hashem suddenly shift course and issue instructions to launch a massive building project, the implementation of which would delay the journey by at least⁶ six months?⁷ Additionally, until this point, the nation had functioned perfectly well with Hashem's presence embodied in the Pillars of Cloud and Fire or descending to Moshe's personal tent.⁸ What required the sudden transformation of the status quo,⁹ and why was Moshe not informed of this change until he was already atop Mt. Sinai?¹⁰

Twin Foci – Revelation and Atonement

The Torah calls the Mishkan both "מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדוּת" ("Tabernacle of Testimony") and "אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד" ("Tent of Meeting"), suggesting that its primary function was to safeguard the "לְחֹת הָעֵדוּת" (the concrete testimony to Hashem's revelation) and to facilitate His ongoing communication with Moshe from between the cherubs on the "אֲרוֹן הָעֵדוּת".¹¹ The main activity in the Tabernacle, though, revolves around its other vessels, particularly the altars and their offerings. These, in contrast to the ark, function as vehicles for atonement.¹² What is the relationship between the roles of these various vessels? Is the focal point of the Mishkan its concealed ark and Tablets or its atoning altars?

¹ Not all commentators, however, agree with these assumptions – see Approaches and Anthropomorphism.

² Cf. the conundrum presented by Shelomo upon completing the building of the Beit HaMikdash: "הִנֵּה הַשָּׁמַיִם" הנה השמים (Melakhim I 8:27), and the contradiction formulated by Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael: "ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם למה נאמר, והלא כבר נאמר הלא את השמים ואת הארץ אני" מלא.

³ Cf. Yirmeyahu who states that Hashem did not even command such offerings: "כִּי לֹא דִבַּרְתִּי אֶת אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם וְלֹא" כי לא דברתי את אבותיכם ולא (צויותים ביום הוציא[י] אותם מארץ מצרים על דברי עולה וזבח). For elaboration, see Purpose of the Sacrifices.

⁴ For an analysis of the relationship between these verses and the altar of the Mishkan, see Altars of Earth, Stone, and Wood.

⁵ Presumably, merely receiving the Tablets would not even have required Moshe to remain for forty days on Mt. Sinai.

⁶ The precise duration of the construction depends on the chronology of Shemot 24-34.

⁷ Furthermore, had Moshe merely ascended to receive the Tablets and returned immediately to the camp (as he did in his earlier ascents in Shemot 19) rather than staying for forty days to receive the blueprints of the Tabernacle, the people would never have made the Golden Calf.

⁸ See Shemot 33:7-11, and see Hoil Moshe Shemot 16:10 and 18:7.

⁹ It is not even clear that the construction of the Tabernacle had any salutary effects on the people's general conduct.

¹⁰ See Shemot 24:12 where Hashem commands Moshe to ascend Mt. Sinai to receive the Tablets, but makes no mention of the Tabernacle.

¹¹ See Shemot 25:22.

¹² See Shemot 29:36-37 and Shemot 30:10. The atoning aspect of sacrifices is also emphasized throughout the first half of Sefer Vayikra. The motif of penance appears also in Shemot 30:15-16 with regard to the half-

shekels donated to the Mishkan's building fund. For further discussion, see [Half Shekels – For Census or Tabernacle](#).

Purpose of the Mishkan

Exegetical Approaches

Overview

Commentators disagree whether to view the Tabernacle as an ideal vehicle for Divine worship, merely a concession to reality, or something in between. Among those who consider the Mishkan to be inherently positive, R"Y Bekhor Shor and Ramban focus on its serving as a home for the Tablets and Hashem's ongoing revelation, the Biur highlights the appropriateness of dedicating our initial creative endeavors to God, and Shadal emphasizes the social benefits of having a national center.

Other Midrashim and commentators, though, see the Mishkan as a necessary corrective for the Israelites' idolatrous desires. Thus, the Tanchuma presents the Mishkan as both an atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf as well as evidence of a Divine amnesty, while Rambam views the Mishkan as an attempt to channel the nation's unfit inclinations to the service of Hashem.

Finally, some exegetes posit that the Mishkan had multiple purposes or evolved as a result of the nation's sins. Abarbanel proposes that originally the Mishkan was to be exclusively an embodiment of Hashem's presence, but that after the sin of the Golden Calf it was modified to become a sacrificial center. Sforno, on the other hand, contends that sacrifices were always a significant part of the Divine plan, but that the people's sin created the need for the centralization of the Divine presence and worship.

An Ideal

Building the Mishkan provided a diverse array of benefits and opportunities for the Children of Israel.

Extension of Sinai

The Mishkan facilitated the continuation of the Divine revelation which began at Mt. Sinai and it housed the Tablets of the Covenant which were given at Sinai.¹

SOURCES: R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, Ramban, U. Cassuto

"**וּשְׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם**" – All three commentators agree that this verse, as per its literal interpretation, provides Hashem's primary reason for commanding the building of the Tabernacle.² However, they disagree as to whether Hashem was physically present in the Mishkan:

- R"Y Bekhor Shor and Ramban render "בְּתוֹכָם" as "in their center", and thus they understand this phrase to mean that Hashem's presence was literally³ contained within the walls of the Tabernacle,⁴ which was located at the geographic center of the nation's encampment.⁵
- Cassuto, however, is more circumspect, stating merely that the nation viewed the Mishkan as a symbol that God's presence was among them.

Need for a physical house

- R"Y Bekhor Shor explains that, at its most basic level, the Tabernacle was designed to house the Ark, which in turn functioned as a safe deposit box for the Tablets. Building on this, Ramban develops the

notion that this connection to the Tablets also mystically transformed the Mishkan and the Ark into an extension of Mt. Sinai,⁶ thereby facilitating the continued Divine presence.⁷ For both of them, while Hashem has no personal need for the Mishkan, it was still a necessary condition for His continued presence in the midst of the nation.

- In contrast, according to Cassuto, although Hashem can dwell amidst the people without the existence of any physical building, the nation needed to see a tangible structure in order to reassure them of God's continued presence.⁸

Why now? For R"Y Bekhor Shor and Ramban, it is logical that the command to build the Mishkan comes only at this point, since it is a continuation of the revelation at Mt. Sinai⁹ and must house the Tablets which Moshe brought down from the mountain. Similarly, for Cassuto, the construction of the Mishkan was timed to be completed before the nation's departure from Sinai.¹⁰

Chronology – According to Ramban and Cassuto, the command to build the Mishkan is recorded in chronological order, as it flowed from the Sinaitic revelation and preceded (and was unconnected to) the sin of the Golden Calf.¹¹ R"Y Bekhor Shor, though, maintains that the instructions were given only after the sin of the Golden Calf.¹²

Relationship of the Mishkan to the sin of the Golden Calf – According to this approach the command to build the Mishkan is independent of the sin.

Ancient Near Eastern parallels – In the Ancient Near East, copies of treaties were often stored in the temples of the gods of the two parties,¹³ both for their safekeeping and to instill fear of retribution from the divine witnesses for any transgressions. As the Tablets of the Law served as testimony to the covenant (or treaty) between the nation and Hashem, it is not surprising that they were similarly stored in the joint "Temple" of Hashem and the nation, the Mishkan.¹⁴

Biblical parallels – Ramban points to a number of linguistic and conceptual parallels which link the giving of the Decalogue at Mt. Sinai and the construction of the Mishkan.¹⁵ These parallels highlight how the Tabernacle transformed the initial one-time revelation into a continuous ongoing communication and relationship between Hashem and the Children of Israel.¹⁶

Focal point and the meaning of "מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדוּת" – R. Yosef Bekhor Shor and Ramban¹⁷ maintain that the Ark of the Testimony ("אָרוֹן הָעֵדוּת") which housed the Tablets of the Testimony ("לְחֹת הָעֵדוּת") are the *raison d'être* for the entire Mishkan (which was thus referred to as "מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדוּת"),¹⁸ as it was above the Ark that Hashem would descend in order to commune with Moshe. They assert that for this very reason, the *aron* is the first vessel commanded to be made.¹⁹ R"Y Bekhor Shor also proposes that the innermost Holy of Holies was Hashem's personal chamber and the *Aron* with its *keruvim* were his throne, as in a royal palace.²⁰

Altars for atonement – Ramban explains that the sacrifices, by atoning for the nation's sins, insure that the Divine presence does not desert the sanctuary.²¹ According to him, the altars were subservient to the *Aron* which was the main focus of the Tabernacle.²²

Tabernacle unmentioned prior to Moshe's ascent – According to this approach, it is possible that Hashem initially mentioned only the Tablets to Moshe, since they are what created the need for the Tabernacle.²³

Purpose of the Beit HaMikdash – Ramban equates the Mishkan and the Mikdash.²⁴ The primary purpose of both was to be a home for the Divine presence.²⁵



Honoring Hashem

The Mishkan provided an opportunity for the Children of Israel to express their gratitude to and respect for Hashem. Thus, all of the nation's initial collective and creative labors are dedicated to Hashem in the form of the Tabernacle.

SOURCES: Moses Mendelssohn in the Biur²⁶

Need for a physical house – According to the Biur, consecrating a House for God was for the people's own benefit. In dedicating the first fruits of their building, the nation learned to recognize Hashem's hand in all that they did and made. For this approach, it was the process of building and dedicating a house to Hashem which was more important than the resulting completed product.²⁷

Why now? As the nation was about to enter the land and begin building an infrastructure, homes, and other institutions, it was incumbent on them to first consecrate the initial fruits of their labor to Hashem.

Chronology – According to this approach, it is logical to assume that the command to build the Tabernacle appears in its chronological place.

Parallels – The Biur compares the Israelite's dedication to Hashem of the first product of their labors to the obligation of giving the first fruits of one's progeny, land, and livestock to God.

Focal point – This position does not focus on any particular vessel or portion of the Mishkan, but rather on the edifice in its entirety.

"וּשְׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכְכֶם" – This approach would view this verse, not as the ultimate purpose of the building, but merely as one of its practical benefits.

Altars for atonement – This opinion also does not see atonement to be the main objective of the Tabernacle.

Purpose of the Beit HaMikdash – Mendelssohn in the Biur explains that when the nation attained a higher economic status in the time of Shelomo, it was appropriate for them to also upgrade the Tabernacle to the more opulent level of the Temple.



National Center

The Mishkan ensured the unity of the nation by providing a centralized location for all to gather in their worship of Hashem.

SOURCES: Shadal

Need for a physical house – Shadal suggests that the house served as a unifying communal center for the nation, helping to keep tribal divisions at bay and instilling feelings of brotherhood as they gathered together

in service of Hashem. According to him, only a tangible structure could impress upon the masses a full appreciation of the fact that Hashem, their king, was in their midst.²⁸ As such, the Tabernacle was built in the image of a king's palace with all of its grandeur.²⁹

Why now? Shadal asserts that God did not want to wait to build this center until the nation would finish the conquest and already be dispersed. Thus, while they were still united, He commanded them to build a portable house which could be set up anywhere.

Chronology – According to Shadal, the command to build the Mishkan is in its chronological place.

Relationship of the Mishkan to the sin of the Golden Calf – Shadal emphasizes that the sin of the Golden Calf did not prompt the command, but, to the contrary, delayed its execution, as God did not desire to dwell among a sinful nation.

Parallels – Shadal develops similar theories with regard to Shabbat and the Three Pilgrimage Festivals ("שלש רגלים"),³⁰ suggesting that they too were designed to unify the nation.³¹

Focal point – Shadal suggests that the sacrificial service on the altar is the main focus of the Tabernacle, as only through bringing tribute to Hashem would the nation internalize His majesty.³² Here, too, Shadal stresses that this was entirely for the nation's benefit.³³

"וּשְׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם" – Shadal understands this verse to be describing the nation's perception that Hashem is dwelling in their midst,³⁴ but that this is not the ultimate purpose of the Mishkan and only a means of achieving national unity.

Altars for atonement – According to Shadal,³⁵ the annual procedure of atoning on the altars was to avert a situation in which the masses might think that the Sanctuary had been permanently polluted by their sins or impurities.³⁶

Purpose of the Beit HaMikdash – The Mikdash similarly served as a national center.³⁷



An Antidote

The construction of the Mishkan was intended not as an ideal or an end unto itself, but rather as a means of remedying a problematic situation.

Means of Atonement

The Tabernacle was built to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf.³⁸

SOURCES: Sifre Devarim,³⁹ Lekach Tov, R. Bachya

"וּשְׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם" – This verse describes the ultimate goal of the atonement process, which was to have God return to the nation after their sin.

Need for a physical house – Although Hashem does not need a house, the nation needed to donate to Hashem in order to reaffirm their loyalty to Him, and the act of donating gold for the construction of the

Mishkan compensated for the sin of giving gold for the making of the Golden Calf.⁴⁰

Chronology

- **Achronological order** – The Sifre would likely maintain that although the directive to build the Tabernacle appears before the sin of the Golden Calf, it was actually commanded only afterwards, and in response to the sin. This is explicit in the Tanchuma.
- **Chronological order** – While Lekach Tov agrees that the building of the Mishkan atoned for the sin of the Golden Calf, he nonetheless asserts that the command preceded the sin, as God "provided a cure before the illness" ("הקדים רפואה למכה").⁴¹

Why now?

- According to the Sifre,⁴² the command was a direct response to the nation's sin.⁴³
- For the Lekach Tov and R. Bachya, as soon as Hashem gave the first set of mitzvot, He also instituted a procedure through which to atone if one transgressed them.

Parallels – Similarly, Bemidbar 17:1-5 and 31:49-54 describe the giving of materials to the Mishkan in the aftermath of sins.

Focal point – R. Yosi b. Hanina in the Sifre views the golden cover for the *Aron*, the source for atonement, as the focal point of the Tabernacle.⁴⁴

The meaning of "משכן העדות" – The Lekach Tov explains that once the Mishkan was built and atonement was achieved, the Divine presence testified to Hashem's special relationship with the Children of Israel.⁴⁵

Tabernacle unmentioned prior to Moshe's ascent – According to the Sifre, it is eminently understandable that Hashem does not mention the Tabernacle prior to Moshe's initial ascent,⁴⁶ as it was not needed at that point.

Purpose of the Beit HaMikdash – It appears from Shemuel I 24 that the building of the Mikdash was a similar attempt to atone for a sin which caused a plague to be visited upon the nation.⁴⁷

Polemical factors – The contention that, through the building of the Mishkan, the Children of Israel atoned for and were completely forgiven for the sin of the Golden Calf may be a response to Christian claims that the Golden Calf caused a permanent breach in God's relationship with the Children of Israel.⁴⁸ See the following approach for elaboration.

Nature of the Golden Calf – This approach would likely view the Golden Calf as an example of full idolatry, rather than merely the nation's desire for a replacement for Moshe.⁴⁹



Sign of Forgiveness

The manifestation of the Divine presence in the Mishkan was intended to testify ("משכן העדות") that Hashem had indeed forgiven the Children of Israel for their sin of the Golden Calf.

SOURCES: Tanchuma,⁵⁰ Rashi⁵¹

"משכן העדות" – testimony for whom?

- **The nations of the world** – The Tanchuma emphasizes that the intent of the Mishkan was to prove to all of the other nations ("עדות לכל באי העולם", "כדי שידעו כל האומות") that Hashem had forgiven the Children of Israel for the sin of the Golden Calf.
- **The Children of Israel themselves** – Rashi modifies the approach of the Tanchuma⁵² and asserts that the proof was needed for internal consumption ("עדות לישראל"), as the Israelites themselves were concerned that Hashem had not completely forgiven them.

"וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם" – These words point to the reason for constructing the Mishkan, to demonstrate that Hashem was once again dwelling among the nation.⁵³

Need for a physical house – Although Hashem had no need for a physical home, tangible proof of Hashem's dwelling was needed to convince the surrounding nations, or the Children of Israel themselves, that He had forgiven them and was once again residing in their midst.⁵⁴

Chronology – According to the Tanchuma and Rashi, the command is not in its chronological place.⁵⁵ It was first given on Yom HaKippurim, when Hashem pardoned the nation for the sin of the Golden Calf.

Polemical factors – The Tanchuma emphasizes that the Tabernacle served as testimony to the entire world that Hashem had forgiven the Children of Israel and not rejected them in the aftermath of the sin of the Golden Calf. The Tanchuma's depiction of "אומות העולם שהיו אומרים לישראל שאין השכינה חוזרת אלינו לעולם" and its employment of the strong language of the verse "יִסְכַּר פִּי" "שנאמר רבים אומרים לנפשי אין ישועתה לו באלהים" appear to indicate that it is reacting to an actual group which was making such a claim. As such, the Midrash may well be a direct response to Christian doctrine that the Golden Calf caused a permanent breach in God's relationship with the Children of Israel and created the need for them to observe all of the mitzvot (as a punishment) rather than merely achieving salvation by having simple faith. According to the Midrash, it is specifically the commandment to build a Tabernacle⁵⁶ which follows the sin of the Golden Calf, while all other mitzvot were given already at Marah or on Mt. Sinai before the sin.⁵⁷

Why now? Until the sin of the Golden Calf, no one doubted God's presence, and a pillar of fire or cloud sufficed. Afterwards, though, it was no longer clear that Hashem would continue to accompany the nation. The Mishkan was built to convince everyone of His continued presence.

Tabernacle unmentioned prior to Moshe's ascent – There was no mention since Hashem did not command the nation to build anything during Moshe's first forty days on Mt. Sinai.

Purpose of the Beit HaMikdash – In Shelomo's prayer after building the Beit HaMikdash, he suggests that one of the purposes of the Mikdash was that Gentiles, too, should recognize "כִּי שָׁמַךְ נִקְרָא עַל הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה" (Melachim I:8:43).



Concession to Human Foibles

The Mishkan was not the preferred forum for worship of Hashem, but simply a necessity given the people's tendencies towards idolatrous practices.

SOURCES: R. Yehuda HaLevi, Rambam

Need for a physical house – Both R. Yehuda HaLevi and Rambam assert that, due to the influences of the surrounding culture of worship, the Children of Israel desired to serve Hashem through physical means.

- R. Yehuda HaLevi emphasizes the nation's need for a tangible object to which they could direct their service to Hashem. As the people were used to others worshiping idols, they, too, looked for some concrete representation of God's presence.
- Rambam, instead, focuses on the people's need for a sacrificial service. As neighboring religions worshiped their gods through the bringing of sacrifices and incense, the Israelites wanted to serve Hashem in the same manner. Rambam emphasizes that God's allowance of this service was a means of weaning the people away from true idolatry.⁵⁸

"וְשִׁכְנֵי בְּתוֹכָם" – Rambam is opposed to the notion that Hashem's presence can be confined to any one place,⁵⁹ and would probably prefer to read this verse to mean that God resides among the people of the nation, rather than in a building in their midst. R. Yehuda HaLevi might say that the verse is speaking from the perspective of the people who saw the building as representing God's presence among them.

Focal point – R. Yehuda HaLevi would probably view the ark and tablets as the central point of the Mishkan as these represented God's presence. For Rambam, in contrast, the altars and accompanying sacrifices were the focus.⁶⁰

Chronology and relationship to Sin of the Golden Calf – Neither of these sources address the issue explicitly:

- Rambam appears to view the Tabernacle and sacrificial service as being a necessary antidote to idolatrous tendencies in general, regardless of the specific sin of the Golden Calf. As such, he might maintain that the command is found in its proper chronological place and was given before the sin.⁶¹
- According to R"Y HaLevi, regardless of the sin, Hashem had planned on giving the people the Tablets and ark to serve as tangible objects through which to focus their worship of Hashem. It is likely then, that the Mishkan was commanded at the same time and with the same purpose. It served to house these objects and thereby represent Hashem's presence within the nation. Alternatively, though, it is possible that originally Hashem thought that the ark alone would suffice to house the Tablets, without a surrounding Tabernacle. However the sin of the Calf demonstrated that the people not only needed a physical symbol of Hashem's presence, but also that there was danger in such symbols, for the people might come to worship the symbols in place of Hashem. Thus, after the sin, Hashem added a Tabernacle to the plan, recognizing that the ark needed to be housed in such a way that the people did not come to mistake it for a god.⁶²

Why now?

- According to R"Y HaLevi, the Tabernacle is directly connected to the receiving of the Tablets (and perhaps also to the Sin of the Calf) and is thus commanded to be built now, right as they are given (or the people sin).
- Rambam could suggest that Hashem gave the command regarding the Tabernacle while still in the Wilderness because He needed to provide an alternative to the idolatrous Canaanite worship before arrival in Israel.⁶³ Had there not been an alternative mode of worship set in place before arrival, there would have been a danger that the nation would come under corrosive influences and abandon monotheistic worship altogether.

Parallels – Rambam suggests that many of the specific laws of sacrifices, such as the selection of animals used, the prohibition against leavened bread and honey and the command to include salt, are similarly a reaction to idolatrous practices.

Altars for atonement – Neither of these sources view attainment of atonement as the main purpose of the building of the Tabernacle. Though this might be an important aspect of worship, had the people not been influenced by surrounding societies and therefore in need of a physical Tabernacle and sacrificial service, atonement might have been accomplished in a different way.

Purpose of the Beit HaMikdash – The Rambam suggests that the main focus of the Beit HaMikdash, too, was the sacrificial service.



Multiple or Evolving Objectives

The Mishkan had multiple purposes or reflected the revision of an originally preferred Divine plan as a result of human failings.

Multiple Purposes

The Mishkan had several objectives, serving as a vehicle through which the nation could honor and show their appreciation to God, as a site which facilitated expiation of sins, and as God's dwelling place.⁶⁴

SOURCES: Tanchuma,⁶⁵ Midrash Aggadah (Buber),⁶⁶ R. Saadia Gaon

"וּשְׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכְכֶם"

- R. Saadia Gaon vehemently opposes the idea that Hashem is confined in, or has need of, a physical structure, and asserts that God does not reside in the Mishkan at all.⁶⁷ He, presumably, understands that in this verse God is saying that He will dwell among the people as a whole.
- Tanchuma, in contrast, reads this to literally refer to Hashem's dwelling in the Mishkan. Out of His love for the nation, Hashem left His abode on high and moved to a parallel one on earth.

Need for a physical house

- **Palace for a king** – Midrash Aggadah and R. Saadia Gaon suggest that the nation only knew how to relate to Hashem via human models of relationship. Thus, they thought to honor God in the way that subjects glorify a king,⁶⁸ by building him a palace complete with a candelabrum, table, and incense.⁶⁹
- **Parallel home** – Tanchuma suggests that Hashem does dwell in a house and views the Mishkan as God's earthly abode.
- **Response to Sin of Golden Calf** – Tanchuma and Midrash Aggadah bring also the opinion that building the Mishkan was either part of the atonement process or testimony to Hashem's forgiveness.⁷⁰
- **Tangential benefits** – R. Saadia points to other benefits of the building as well, including the fact that it serves as a focal point for people's prayers, as a disincentive to sin (lest it be destroyed), and as a site where people could prophesy and God could perform signs and wonders.

Chronology

- **Chronological** – According to Midrash Aggadah⁷¹ and R. Saadia, the story is in its proper place. Though Midrash Aggadah asserts that certain aspects of the Tabernacle were meant to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf (or other future sins), it explains that God preempted the nation's sins with a ready-made cure.⁷²
- **Achronological** – According to the opinion in Tanchuma that the construction was a response to the sin of the Golden Calf, the command is achronological.

Why now? According to Tanchuma, the command was a direct response to the nation's sin and logically followed it. The Midrash Aggadah might alternatively suggest that right after Hashem gave the first set of mitzvot (even before the sin of the Golden Calf) He instituted a procedure through which to atone if one transgressed them. One might also suggest that it was right after God revealed Himself to the nation at Sinai, that they desired to reciprocate and honor Him via building Him the equivalent of a palace.

Focal point – The Mishkan does not have just one focal point. The edifice as a whole was a means of honoring God, while the sacrificial altars played a role in atonement.

Altars for atonement – Tanchuma and Midrash Aggadah assert that many aspects of the Tabernacle served as means to facilitate expiation of sins. The gold atoned for the gold of the Golden Calf, the half shekel compensated for the nation's mistake in calculating Moshe's arrival down the mountains, and acacia wood (עֲצֵי שִׁטִּים) offset the future sin of Baal Peor which took place at אִשְׁתֵּי. ⁷³ The institution of altars and the daily sacrifices served to make amends for wrongdoings that might occur on any given day or night.



Mishkan vs. Sacrifices

In Hashem's original plan, there was to be just the Tabernacle, a vehicle through which the nation would feel His presence among them. Only after the sin of the Golden Calf, did Hashem add a sacrificial component to facilitate the atonement process.

SOURCES: Abarbanel

Need for a physical house – Hashem, not being a physical being, has no need for a house. Yet, as He wanted to ensure that the Children of Israel felt His presence and providence, He commanded that they build a tangible structure in their midst to help them understand that God was watching over them.

Chronology and Relationship to the Sin of the Calf – The command to build the Tabernacle is chronological, but did not include the laws of sacrifices which were only commanded after the sin of the Golden Calf.⁷⁴

Why now? The sacrificial service was a direct response to the sin of the Golden Calf, as Hashem realized that it was necessary to institute a process of atonement for when people sin.⁷⁵

Focal point – According to Abarbanel, there was a dual focus in the Tabernacle, on both the ark and the altars.

"וּשְׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם" – This verse presents the main reason for the Mishkan's construction. Abarbanel, though, does not think that Hashem is saying that He will literally dwell in the Tabernacle. Rather, the verse is

metaphorical and means that Hashem's presence and providence will be felt among the nation.

Altars for atonement – After the nation's sin, these became a crucial aspect of the Mishkan. Abarbanel, though, does not explain why the altar was part of the original command, if at that point, sacrifices were not part of Hashem's plans.

Tabernacle unmentioned prior to Moshe's ascent – It is unclear, according to Abarbanel, why the command is not explicit prior to Moshe's ascent.



Setting Divine Boundaries

Originally God's presence could be accessed anywhere and by anyone, but after the sin of the Golden Calf, an intermediary in the form of the Mishkan and priests was necessary.

SOURCES: Sforno, Hoil Moshe

Need for a physical house – After the sin of the Golden Calf, Hashem preferred not to dwell among the nation at all. Due to Moshe's prayers, a compromise was reached through which Hashem's presence would reside among them, but only via the Tabernacle and its vessels.

Why now? Hashem's original and preferred plan was not to have a Tabernacle, but rather to be worshiped via individual altars.⁷⁶ After the sin of the Golden Calf, though, the nation proved unworthy of such worship, and a new system was set up.

Chronology – The command is out of place and was given only during Moshe's final ascent of Mt. Sinai after the sin of the Golden Calf.

Parallels – Sforno asserts that several other laws, such as kashrut, laws of purity, and libations, were similarly instituted only in the aftermath of the sin of the Golden Calf, and were meant to serve as a corrective to the nation's behavior.

Focal point – According to Sforno, the cherubs atop the ark are the focal point of the Tabernacle, for it is through them that Hashem speaks to Moshe and listens to his prayers.

"וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם" – According to Sforno, Hashem is referring to having His providence dwell among the nation. Prior to the sin, no vehicle was necessary to accomplish this, but now that was no longer true.

Tabernacle unmentioned prior to Moshe's ascent – There was no mention of the building of the Tabernacle since at that point, there were no plans for one to be built.

¹ R"Y Bekhor Shor is the commentator who most explicitly merges these two motifs. It is theoretically possible to split between them, however the Sinai connection serves as the link between them.

² See also Pesikta DeRav Kahana and Tanchuma.

³ See Anthropomorphism for discussion of the different views regarding the nature of God's presence and their implications for understanding our verse.

⁴ This reading is supported by several verses which appear to indicate that Hashem's presence resided in the Mishkan itself – see Shemot 25:22, Shemot 29:42-43, Shemot 40:34-38, and others. It is also the interpretation adopted by Pesikta DeRav Kahana and Tanchuma. In contrast, Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael appears to reject this possibility.

⁵ R"Y Bekhor Shor even compares the Israelite camp encircling the Tabernacle to the angels on high surrounding God's throne. Cf. Rambam and Abarbanel below who interpret "בְּתוֹכָם" as simply "among them" and "וְשִׁכְנֵי בְּתוֹכָם" to refer to the Divine providence over the nation in general, rather than something centered in the Mishkan.

⁶ See Ramban Devarim 4:9 regarding the importance of maintaining the memory of the Sinaitic experience. Cf. Ramban Shemot 13:16 where he develops a similar position regarding the various mitzvot which were intended to insure the continued experience of the Exodus.

⁷ See Ramban's formulation: "וְסוּד הַמִּשְׁכָּן הוּא, שִׁיחִיָּה הַכְּבוֹד אֲשֶׁר שָׁן עַל הַר סִינַי שׁוֹכֵן עֲלָיו בְּנִסְתֵּר". For Ramban, the Mishkan replaced Mt. Sinai as the source of revelation, and thus subsequent mitzvot were given from the Tabernacle.

⁸ Note the contrast between Ramban's mystical approach and Cassuto's more rational bent. Cf. R"Y Bekhor Shor who suggests that the command to build the Tabernacle was intended to provide the people with extra opportunities to observe mitzvot. This view is found already in the Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael.

⁹ It is possible that according to them, Hashem's presence continued to reside on Mt. Sinai until the Mishkan was built – see Ibn Ezra.

¹⁰ According to Cassuto, while the nation was encamped at Sinai, the mountain itself symbolized Hashem's previous revelation (even if His presence was no longer there); the Mishkan became necessary only once they left Mt. Sinai.

¹¹ Ramban here is consistent with his general disinclination to suggest that Biblical narratives are out of order, unless this is explicitly indicated by the text. See About Ramban for elaboration.

¹² R"Y Bekhor Shor might explain that since Hashem knew that the first set of Tablets would be broken, he waited to command Moshe about the Mishkan until Moshe's third set of forty days on Sinai when he received the second set of Tablets.

¹³ See Cassuto Shemot 25:16 who mentions this practice with regard to a treaty between Ramses of Egypt and a Hittite king. See, also, N. Sarna, Exploring Exodus (New York, 1996): 137-138, who points to a Hittite treaty in which the king writes, "A duplicate of this treaty has been deposited before the sun-goddess of Arnina... In the Mitanni land [a duplicate] has been deposited before Tessub, the lord of the kurrinu [sanctuary or shrine] of Kahat".

¹⁴ This practice can also explain the opinion of the Sages in Mekhilta Yitro BaChodesh 8 that each of the two tablets contained all ten utterances. If treaties were usually written in duplicate, one copy for each party, it is logical that the tablets, too, were identical, one being a copy for Hashem and one for the Nation of Israel, each stored in the ark within Hashem's Mishkan.

Cassuto suggests that the ark itself was also seen as more than a storage chest. In the Ancient Near East, treaties were deposited "at the feet" of the deity and it is possible that the Israelites imaginatively viewed the ark as Hashem's "footstool". Thus, King David in Divrei HaYamim I 28:2 says: "אֲנִי עִם לְבָבִי לְבָנוֹת בַּיִת מְנוּחָה", "לְאָרוֹן בְּרִית ה' וְלִהְדָם רִגְלֵי אֱלֹהֵינוּ נְבוּאָה לְמִשְׁכְּנֹתַי נִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לִהְדָם רִגְלָיו". and Tehillim 132:7-8 also relates the two: "קוּמָה ה' לְמִנוּחֶיךָ אֶתְּהָ וְאָרוֹן עֲדָךְ".

¹⁵ He notes that the cloud of Hashem's glory descended upon both Mt. Sinai and the Mishkan, God's voice was heard from each, both included prohibitions against coming too close to Hashem's holiness on pain of death, protective boundaries were set around each, and how Hashem called to Moshe to approach in both cases.

¹⁶ The roots of this explanation can be found in the words of R. Shemuel b. Chofni Gaon who points out that Hashem's glory migrated directly from Mt. Sinai to the Tabernacle. See also R. Yosef Bekhor Shor on Shemot 40:29 and Cassuto.

¹⁷ See also Ramban in his Hasagot to Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh 33, where he counts the mitzvah to build the Ark as its own distinct commandment.

¹⁸ This position is also explicit in Rashbam, and see also Ibn Ezra.

¹⁹ See also Rashbam cited above. Rashbam, R"Y Bekhor Shor, and Ramban all explain that the different ordering in Parashat Vayakhel is pragmatic, as one cannot construct the ark until there is a house to place it in. Thus, in Vayakhel, the physical structure is built first and only afterwards are the vessels made.

²⁰ R"Y Bekhor Shor proceeds to develop this analogy further, noting that the sacrificial altar, as the equivalent of the royal kitchen and slaughterhouse, was therefore at a distance from the inner chamber. Cf. Midrash Aggadah (Buber) below.

²¹ See Ramban's formulation in his Introduction to Vayikra "שיהו הקרבנות כפרה להן ולא יגרמו העונות לסלק". [Ramban may be focusing here on the role of sin offerings in particular, as burnt offerings and peace offerings existed even before the Mishkan was built.] Cf. Ramban in his Derashat Torat Hashem Temimah where he suggests that the Divine glory initially descended upon the Mishkan (and the Beit HaMikdash) only as a result of the offering of the sacrifices.

²² Cf. R"Y Bekhor Shor who contends that the bringing of sacrifices allow a person to atone and receive a fresh start, thereby preventing him from wallowing in his sins in despair. [See also Shadal below who adopts a similar approach but limits its application to unintentional sins.] For R"Y Bekhor Shor, the sacrifices have intrinsic value, but they are independent of the Mishkan (having existed prior to it) and are not the reason for its construction.

²³ Alternatively, according to R"Y Bekhor Shor, Hashem waited to mention the Tabernacle until it was needed for the Tablets.

²⁴ See also the parallels noted by Rashbam Shemot 40:35.

²⁵ See also Ramban Bemidbar 16:21 where he contends that the Children of Israel were punished for the delay in building a permanent home for Hashem's presence.

²⁶ The roots of this approach may be found in the Midrash Aggadah (Buber) cited below.

²⁷ It thus better explains the reason for the original construction than the need for the ongoing service.

²⁸ Shadal, like R. Yehuda HaLevi and Rambam below (and Cassuto above), views the need for a physical building and all of its accouterments as necessary because of the Israelites' need for a concrete symbol of God's presence. However, in contrast to R"Y HaLevi and the Rambam, Shadal does not regard this in a negative light and does not think the nation needs to be weaned away from their notions ("שאין המנהג הזה רע").

²⁹ Cf. the Midrash Aggadah (Buber) below and R"Y Bekhor Shor above. Shadal extends the analogy from the palace furniture to the need for royal servants (the *kohanim*).

³⁰ See Shadal in his commentary on Shemot 20:11, and in Yesodei HaTorah 53-54 (pp.61-62), and in [= Mechkarei HaYahadut I (pp.44-45)].

³¹ Cf. Philo in *On the Special Laws* 1:70, Josephus in *Antiquities* 4:8:7 (203-204), and Rambam in *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:32,43.

³² See, however, Shadal on "מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדוּת" where he explains that the Mishkan was called this after the "לַחַת הָעֵדוּת" and "אֲרוֹן הָעֵדוּת" which were the source of its holiness.

³³ See Shadal's interpretation of *Yirmeyahu* 7:22.

³⁴ Like Rambam and Abarbanel below, he understands this only in a metaphorical sense.

³⁵ See Shadal *Vayikra* 16:16.

³⁶ See also *Half Shekels – For Census or Tabernacle* for Shadal's interpretation of the atonement provided by giving the half-Shekels. Regarding individual atonement sacrifices, see Shadal *Vayikra* 1:2 and cf. R"Y Bekhor Shor above.

³⁷ See Yerovam's concerns and plan of action in *Melakhim I* 12:26-33.

³⁸ One could perhaps extend this theory to suggest that the Tabernacle was not limited to atoning for the one-time sin of the Golden Calf, but rather was built to facilitate the expiation of all types of future sins via the bringing of sacrifices. However, since a stand-alone altar would have sufficed for atonement sacrifices, this would not account for the need to build the rest of the Mishkan complex. Cf. the *Tanchuma* and *Midrash Aggadah* below which propose that atoning for future sins was the purpose of building specifically the sacrificial altar.

³⁹ This motif is also found in the *Tanchuma*. However, see below that this passage from the *Tanchuma* synthesizes this with the notion that the Mishkan constituted a proof that Hashem had forgiven the Children of Israel, and that other passages in the *Tanchuma* present a variety of other reasons for the building of the Mishkan and its components.

⁴⁰ This approach views the process of building as being more important than the finished product. It sees a "measure for measure" atonement in the actions of the people. The gold of the Tabernacle was supposed to atone for the gold used to make the Golden Calf, and the new "gathering" to contribute for the Mishkan was supposed to undo the original "gathering" to worship idolatry. See *Lekach Tov* for further parallels.

⁴¹ Cf. R. Bachya who notes the same principle, but it is unclear from his words whether he maintains that the command was given beforehand, or only that the text placed the command beforehand to relay this idea.

⁴² Similarly, for the *Tanchuma*.

⁴³ It follows from this that, had the people not sinned, there would have been no need for the Mishkan.

⁴⁴ The other sources speak more generally of the gold used in the Mishkan.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Tanchuma* below. In contrast to the *Tanchuma* which presents the testimony as the reason for the command to build the Mishkan, the *Lekach Tov* understands that the Mishkan was constructed to atone and God's presence was merely a consequence of and testimony to the successful expiatory process.

⁴⁶ In fact, the instructions provided for the building of an altar in *Shemot* 20:20-22 appear to contradict the description of the altar of the Mishkan. For more, see *Altars of Earth, Stone, and Wood*. See also *Shemot* 23:19-33 which mentions the bringing of the first fruits of the land of Israel to the House of Hashem, but there is no hint of any need to build a temporary place of worship in the Wilderness itself.

⁴⁷ See also the formulation in the *Haggadah Shel Pesach* "ובנה לנו את בית הבחירה לכפר על כל עונותינו".

Contrast to Ramban cited above that the plague came because of the delay in the building of the Mikdash.

⁴⁸ See the *Lekach Tov* who follows *Vayikra Rabbah* 27:8 in attempting to mitigate the severity of the sin by suggesting that it was the "ערב רב" rather than the Children of Israel who were primarily responsible for the making of the Golden Calf.

⁴⁹ See Sin of the Golden Calf for elaboration.

⁵⁰ Tanchuma Terumah 8 integrates this theme with the notion that the Mishkan was a vehicle for atonement. See below that other passages in the Tanchuma present an assortment of additional reasons for the commands to build a Mishkan and its components.

⁵¹ The contents of Rashi's position in the Sefer HaPardes and Siddur Rashi are also cited in his name by the Shibbolei HaLeket 189. Rashi Shemot 29 also mentions the notion of atoning for the sin of the Golden Calf, but only with regard to the sacrifices brought at the consecration of the Tabernacle, and not the structure itself.

⁵² Rashi is likely influenced by the Sifra which presents Aharon as being concerned that Hashem had not forgiven him.

⁵³ However, in contrast to the "Extension of Sinai" and "Means of Atonement" approaches above, securing Hashem's presence was not the ultimate objective in of itself, but only a means of proving that the Children of Israel had not lost Divine favor.

⁵⁴ In contrast to the Sifre's position above which sees the Tabernacle as a conciliatory gift from the nation to Hashem and a means of asking for a pardon, this position views the building as a gift from God to man, telling the people that He had indeed forgiven them.

⁵⁵ Rashi's remark that Aharon's sacrifice at the consecration of the Mishkan which was commanded already in Shemot 29 (as part of the Mishkan directive) came to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf also indicates that the sin preceded the instructions to build the Mishkan. Rashi, here, is consistent with his general approach towards ordering in Tanakh, where he is often willing to posit achronology. See About Rashi for elaboration.

⁵⁶ The Midrash may be making the ironic point that building temples or churches is one of the few commandments that Christians observe.

⁵⁷ See also Avot and Mitzvot – Was Avraham the First Jew?.

⁵⁸ He explains that Hashem could not simply uproot the practice altogether since no one can totally change their lifestyle and habits overnight. Thus, Hashem preferred to gradually pull the nation away from such worship.

⁵⁹ This is in line with his tendency to avoid anything that could in any way imply the slightest degree of Divine corporeality.

⁶⁰ The Rambam does not even count the making of the ark as a separate commandment, but rather discusses it together with the other vessels.

⁶¹ Though the sin might have confirmed the need for a Mishkan, it did not actively prompt the command. Alternatively, one could suggest that though Hashem had always planned on commanding the construction of the Tabernacle, the sin convinced Him that it needed to be built already now. If so, the command is not found in its chronological place.

⁶² By concealing the ark in the Mishkan, within the Holy of Holies, this purpose was served.

⁶³ See above note that it is also possible that the decision was prompted by the people's sin with the Golden Calf.

⁶⁴ Not all the sources listed below mention all these aspects, but each mentions several different objectives.

⁶⁵ In the many passages in Tanchuma which refer to the purpose of the building of the Mishkan, a variety of potential reasons are presented. It is possible that the Midrash is simply an eclectic collection, with no consistent approach to the question. The presentation below, though, chooses to view the various options as

working together. See above that this passage from the Tanchuma synthesizes this with the notion that the Mishkan constituted a proof that Hashem had forgiven the Children of Israel, and that other passages in the Tanchuma present a variety of other reasons for the building of the Mishkan and its components. The Tanchuma integrates this theme together with the idea that the Mishkan was a vehicle for atonement.

⁶⁶ The Midrash Aggadah, like the Tanchuma, contains many different passages that relate to the question of the Mishkan's purpose, with each emphasizing a different role. As this midrash is a late collection, culling from earlier sources, it seems that the author meant to synthesize all these aspects and viewed them as working together.

See below that Midrash Aggadah maintains that the purpose of several of the individual components of the Mishkan was to atone for the nation's future sins. However, it differs from the other Midrashim in that it views the purpose of the Mishkan in its entirety as a way of the nation demonstrating their appreciation of Hashem. Midrash Aggadah also posits that once the Golden Calf was made, the implementation of the plans to build the Mishkan also served to atone for the nation's sin.

⁶⁷ It is just the light of his presence that resides there.

⁶⁸ The Midrash presents the idea of building a house as stemming from the people's request, which Hashem then agreed to. R. Saadia Gaon, in contrast, asserts that God commanded the nation to serve him in the way servants serve their king.

⁶⁹ Cf. R. Yosef Bekhor Shor and Shadal above who similarly see the Mishkan as modeled after a human palace. R. Yosef Bekhor Shor suggests that the outside altar and sacrifices are parallel to the palace kitchen, the table and menorah represent the inner rooms of the palace, while the inner sanctum with the ark is comparable to the king's own bedroom.

⁷⁰ See above for elaboration.

⁷¹ See the formulation of Midrash Aggadah Shemot 32:1: "לפיכך הקדים להם מחצית השקל לכפר".

⁷² This is explicit only regarding the use of half shekels, but would logically extend to the rest of the position.

⁷³ This point is not made in the Tanchuma.

⁷⁴ Abarbanel points to the verse from Yirmeyahu 7, "כי לא דברתי את אבותיכם ולא צויתים ביום הוציא[ני] אותם מארץ", "מִצְרַיִם עַל דְּבַרִי עוֹלָה וְזָבַח" as proof that the sacrificial service was not part of Hashem's original plan.

⁷⁵ Shadal questions Abarbanel on this point. He finds it incredulous to suggest that Hashem only realized the nation's potential for sin after the Golden Calf. Even without this failure, it should have been evident that everyone errs and would eventually sin. Shadal additionally questions what role the altar was supposed to play, if there were to be no sacrifices.

⁷⁶ Hashem's command to build stone altars in Shemot 20:20 represented the ideal.

Purpose of the Mishkan

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