

### Mikdash and Mishkan: There's no place like home

In 1939, Metro Goldwyn Meyer studios released the greatest film of all time: The Wizard of Oz. When I was little, I would play the VHS on repeat. Week after week, I would watch the tornado uproot Dorothy and her house and transport them to the magical wilderness of Oz. While there are so many iconic moments in the movie, one of my favourites is this moment when Dorothy discovers the power of her yearning and the magic of her ruby slippers. Let's relive it together:

[SCREEN SHARE:

<https://www.youtubetrimmer.com/view/?v=ooM-RGUTe2E&start=17&end=38> ]

Forty years of wandering in the desert also teaches us that *there's no place like home*. And this week, our parasha opens with the instruction to build a home, a dwelling place, for God. *Va'asu li mikdash veshakhanti betocham. K'chol asher ani mareh otcha et tavnit hamishkan v'et tavnit kol keilav vchen ta'asu. They shall make for me a **mikdash**, that I may dwell among them. Exactly as I show you - the pattern of the **mishkan** and the pattern of all its furnishings - so shall you make it.*

Here, God uses two different words, *mikdash* and *mishkan*, to refer to God's dwelling place. One has to wonder: does God command the construction of a mikdash, or a mishkan? Or are they merely synonyms?

**I want to suggest that while the mishkan and the mikdash serve the same purpose, God uses both words because they exist, each in their own form, *for different times*. Each reminds us of the necessity of the other, and each fulfills the need to encounter God in its own way.**

In both guises, either as mikdash or as mishkan, this place served our ancestors as a holy space of God's presence. "Mikdash," suggests a fixed structure that, through its distinction, designation and dedication, possesses the quality of kedusha, holiness.. According to Eskenazi-Weiss, "Mishkan," meanwhile, "indicates a moving, dynamic, presence, not one tied to a fixed location. " The word "mishkan" therefore suggests a portable structure that houses the presence of God anywhere.

18th century commentator Chaim ibn Attar asks: "Why does our verse begin with Mikdash and immediately follow with the word mishkan?" For Ibn Attar, the desert mishkan serves as a temporary placeholder for the future Beit HaMikdash, the Temple in Jerusalem - God's fixed dwelling place. Had the Torah begun with mishkan, we might have assumed that the commandment was temporary, limited to our time in the desert. Rather, as Ibn Attar would have it, the *Commandment* to build a mikdash outlives even the *beit ha-Mikdash itself*, teaching us that it is a positive commandment to establish a sanctuary to God in every generation.

Ibn Attar signals that the terms mikdash and mishkan are ambiguous and variable in relation to permanence and impermanence. Despite its concrete fixedness, the mikdash is, in fact, impermanent. It is bounded, not only by its walls, but by time and space. For anything concrete and tangible can be destroyed. A mishkan, on the other hand, in its fluidity and transience, actually expresses some kind of permanence, for it has the ability to exist across time and space.

Throughout our history, we have moved between **mishkan moments and mikdash moments**. Parashat Terumah launches our very first **mishkan moment** as bnei Yisrael, **yearning to be home**. Much later Solomon's Temple, the Beit haMikdash, served as the paradigmatic **mikdash** moment: A concrete, fixed structure, symbolizing a sense of rootedness, a sense of **finally being home**. [pause]

Still, the walls came tumbling down, assaulting our people with the Temple's impermanence and forcing us into exile.

Solomon himself questions the attempt to house God *at all*: "Even the heavens to their uttermost reaches cannot contain You, how much less this house that I have built!"

So, in their moment of rupture and dislocation, the rabbis found their mishkan moment, by taking God with them, *back into exile*. Shekhinta Ba'Galuta, as midrash teaches us<sup>1</sup>. The Shekhina - who shares a root with the word "mishkan" - is **with us and accessible to us** everywhere we go: In joy and in sorrow; in community and in isolation; in wholeness and in destruction; at home and in exile.

In moments of disruption and dislocation, loss and uncertainty, we depend on the mishkan because we know that while most things in life are temporary and ephemeral - even the Beit haMikdash - God, holiness and community are not. We have access to God's presence and the experience of community even in the 40-year expanse of the Wilderness, or by the rivers of Babylon, or in the space between the squares on a Zoom call.

This is the disruption and loss of *our mishkan moment*.

Yet mishkan moments offer us the opportunity for innovation. Rabbi Alan Lew teaches that "if the Temple had never been destroyed, the renewal Judaism

---

<sup>1</sup> Norman J. Cohen, Shekhinta Ba-Galuta: A midrashic response to Destruction And Persecution, Journal for the Study of Judaism, vol XIII, No 1-2.

The rabbis provide a midrashic response to the destruction with the belief that when the Temple fell, the Shekhina, God's indwelling Presence, journeyed with the people into exile and will be redeemed with the people.

needed so badly could never have taken place...”. The rabbis, in their **mishkan moment, reimagined** the possibilities for experiencing community and holiness in exile. They reshaped Judaism anew - a Judaism that we have inherited and continue to renew to this day.

But even in the midst of innovation, the rabbis yearned for the mikdash. There **is no place like home**: The mikdash makes us feel rooted. It grounds us and connects us in a way that the mishkan doesn't.

In mishkan moments, the mikdash remains the fixed point of reference that helps distinguish between being in exile **[pregnant pause]** and being altogether lost.

So the rabbis conceived of the synagogue as a *mikdash me'at*, a minor Temple, because they knew that some needs could only be met together and in person and that bagels and lox taste better when shared.

And here we find ourselves, in our own personal exile, our very own **mishkan moment**. Covid-19 has dislocated us and exiled us from our *mikdashei me'at*, **our “minor Temples”, that is, our synagogues**. But this pandemic has also challenged us to find creative, meaningful ways to connect with each other and with God. We have transformed our homes and our hearts into mishkanot,

sacred spaces, and bridged the boundaries of our geographically divided communities. We, like the rabbis, have grieved, learned, grown and innovated.

But Oh how we yearn to return! How we long to be back home in the synagogue, in the mikdash me'at, together! Our return is in sight, but until then, here we are, in our very own **mishkan moment**.

*"They shall make for me a mikdash"...according to "the pattern of the mishkan": Mikdash, or Mishkan?* Parashat Teruma teaches us that we need both mikdash and mishkan moments.

There will be times when we are rooted, when we can enjoy our holy places to gather together to eat, love, and pray. We need the mikdash to create distinctions between the ordinary and the holy. We need the mikdash to feel grounded, to feel // like **we are home**.

But we also need the reassurance that something is permanent, that we can bring God with us into exile, that holiness and community transcend the boundaries of a building, even when we longingly say: **there's no place like home**.

As much as we need them, mikdash and mishkan depend on each other. The *Commandment* to build a mikdash outlives the *beit ha-Mikdash itself*. In the rabbis' day, the synagogue was the **mishkan moment** response to this commandment. Yet they called it the ***mikdash me'at*** because they yearned to be together, at home. And in calling it a mikdash me'at, the rabbis intuited what it would become for us - our fixed compass point.

May we soon find our way home, and in the meantime, may we make the most of our mishkan moment, even if it feels a bit like exile.