



Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

TERUMAH • תרומה

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ז"צ

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.

"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah. An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

This year's series of essays were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks zt"l in 5773 (2012–2013). These timeless messages are accompanied by a new [Family Edition](#) created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha.

Two Narratives of Creation

The Torah describes two acts of creation: God's creation of the universe, and the Israelites' creation of the Mikdash, or Mishkan, the Sanctuary that travelled with them in the desert, the prototype of the Temple in Jerusalem.

The connection between them is not incidental. As a number of commentators have noted, the Torah invokes a series of verbal parallels between them. The effect is

unmistakable. The latter mirrors the former. As God made the universe, so He instructed the Israelites to make the Mishkan. It is their first great constructive and collaborative act after crossing the Red Sea, leaving the domain of Egypt and entering their new domain as the people of God. Just as the universe began with an act of creation, so Jewish history (the history of a redeemed people) begins with an act of creation:

The Universe (Bereishit)	The Mishkan (Shemot)
"And God made the sky" (Gen. 1:7)	"They shall make Me a Sanctuary" (Ex. 25:8)
"And God made the two great lights" (Gen. 1:16)	"They shall make an Ark" (Ex. 25:10)
"And God made the beasts of the earth" (Gen. 1:25)	"Make a table" (Ex. 25:23)
"And God saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good." (Gen. 1:31)	"Moses saw all the skilled work and behold they had done it; as God commanded it, they had done it." (Ex. 39:43)
"The heavens and earth and all of their array were completed." (Gen. 2:1)	"All the work of the Tabernacle of the Tent of Meeting was completed" (Ex. 39:32)
"And God completed all the work that He had done" (Gen. 2:2)	"And Moses completed the work" (Ex. 40:33)
"And God blessed" (Gen. 2:3)	"And Moses blessed" (Ex. 39:43)
"And sanctified it" (Gen. 2:3)	"And you shall sanctify it and all its vessels" (Ex. 40:9)

The key words – *make, see, complete, bless, sanctify, work, behold* – are the same in both narratives. The effect is to suggest that making the Mishkan was, for the Israelites, what creating the universe was for God.

Yet the disparity is extraordinary. The creation of the universe takes a mere 34 verses (Bereishit ch. 1, together with the first three verses of Bereishit ch. 2). The making of the Mishkan takes hundreds of verses (Terumah, Tetzaveh, part of Ki Tissa, Vayakhel, and Pekudei) – considerably more than ten times as long. Why? The universe is vast. The Sanctuary was small, a modest construction of poles and drapes that could be dismantled and carried from place to place as the Israelites journeyed through the wilderness. Given that the length of any passage in the Torah is a guide to the significance it attaches to an episode or law, why devote so much time and space to the Tabernacle? The answer is profound. The Torah is not man's book of God. It is God's book of humankind. It is not difficult for an infinite, omnipotent Creator to make a home for humanity. What is difficult is for human beings, in their finitude and vulnerability, to make a home for God. Yet that is the purpose, not only of the Mishkan in particular but of the Torah as a whole.

A Midrash puts it graphically:

“It came to pass on the day that Moses finished erecting the Tabernac-le” [Num. 7:1] – Rabbi [Judah HaNasi] said, “Wherever it says ‘and it came to pass’, it refers to something new.” Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said, “Wherever it says ‘and it came to pass’, it refers to something that existed in the past,

and was then interrupted, and then returned to its original situation.”

This is the meaning of the words “I have come into My garden, My sister, My bride” (Song of Songs 5:1). When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the universe, He desired to have a dwelling place in the lower worlds, as He has in the upper worlds. He summoned Adam and said, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil” but Adam transgressed the command. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: “This is what I wanted, that just as I have a dwelling-place in the upper worlds, so I wished to have a dwelling place in the lower worlds. I commanded you one thing, and you did not keep it!” Immediately, God withdrew His Presence to the heavens...

[The Midrash then lists the subsequent sins of humankind, each of which caused the Divine Presence to withdraw one more level from the earth. Then came Abraham and his descendants, each of whom brought the Divine Presence one stage closer...]

Then came Moses and brought the Divine Presence down to earth. When? When the Tabernacle was erected. Then the Holy One, blessed be He, said: “I have come into My garden, My sister, My bride” – I have come to that which I desired [from the outset]. This is the meaning of “It came to pass on the day that Moses finished erecting the Tabernac-le” – the source of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's statement that

“Wherever it says ‘and it came to pass’ it refers to something that existed in the past, and was then interrupted, and then returned to its original situation.”

Tanchumah [Buber], Naso, 24

The Tabernacle, small and fragile though it was, was an event of cosmic significance. It brought the Divine Presence [the Shechinah, which comes from the same root as Mishkan] down from heaven to earth. How, though, are we to understand this idea? It is contained in one of the key words of the Torah, namely *kadosh*, “holy”.

As the Jewish mystics noted, creation involves an act of self-limitation on the part of the Creator. The word *olam*, “universe” is directly related to the word *ne-elam*, meaning “hidden”. For there to be the possibility of a being with freewill, choice, and moral responsibility, God cannot be a ubiquitously tangible Presence. When the Israelites heard the voice of God at Sinai, they said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen, but let not God say any more to us, or we will die” (Ex. 20:16). The direct, unmediated Presence of God is overwhelming.

The infinite crowds out the finite. God is like a parent; and unless a parent lets go, the child will never learn to walk. Letting go means that the child will stumble and fall, but not forever. Eventually it will learn to walk. So it is with other forms of learning-by-doing. At various stages a parent must progressively withdraw to leave space for the child to grow. So too God must withdraw if humanity – made in His image – is eventually to become His

“partner in the work of creation”. Creation is an act of Divine self-limitation.

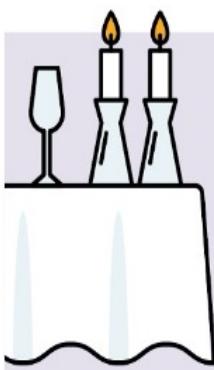
This, however, creates a paradox. If God is perceptible everywhere, there is no room for humankind. But if God is perceptible nowhere, how can humanity know Him, reach Him, or understand what He wants from us? The answer – already hinted at in the account of creation itself – is that God reserves, in several dimensions, a domain that is peculiarly His. The first is in time – the seventh day (and eventually, the seventh month, the seventh year, and the jubilee at the end of the seventh cycle of sabbatical years). The second was among the nations after their division into multiple languages and civilisations – the covenantal people, the children of Israel. The third was in space – the Tabernacle. Each of these is holy, meaning, a point at which the Divine Presence emerges from hiddenness to exposure, from concealment to revelation. As Shabbat is to time, so the Tabernacle was to space: *kadosh*, holy, set apart, God's domain. The holy is the metaphysical arena where heaven and earth meet.

That meeting has specific parameters. It is where God rules, not humankind. Therefore it is associated with the renunciation of the autonomous human will. There is no room for private initiative on the part of humankind. That is why, later, Nadav and Avihu die because they bring a fire-offering that “was not commanded.” Just as *chol* (“the secular”) is where God practises self-limitation to create space for humankind, so *kodesh* is where human beings engage in self-limitation to create space for God.

That is why the creation of the Tabernacle by the Israelites is the counterpart of the creation of the universe by God. Both were

acts of self-renunciation whereby the one made space for the other. The elaborate detail with which the Torah describes the making of the Mishkan is to show that none of it was done at the initiative of Moses, or Betzalel, or the Israelites themselves. Hence the lack of parallelism at one crucial point. Whereas after the creation of the universe we read, “And God saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good” (Bereishit 1:31), after the making of the Mishkan we read, “Moses saw all the skilled work and behold they had done it; as God commanded it, they had done it.”

When it comes to the holy, “as God commanded it” is the human equivalent of the Divine “it was very good”. *Chol* is the space God makes for man. *Kodesh* is the space we make for God.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why do you think the Torah spends so much more time describing the small Mishkan than the entire vast universe?
2. What does it mean to make space for God in our busy daily lives?
3. Why was it so important that Bnai Yisrael followed God's instructions exactly as He commanded rather than using their own creative ideas?

● These questions come from this week's **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks' Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/terumah/two-narratives-of-creation/>