

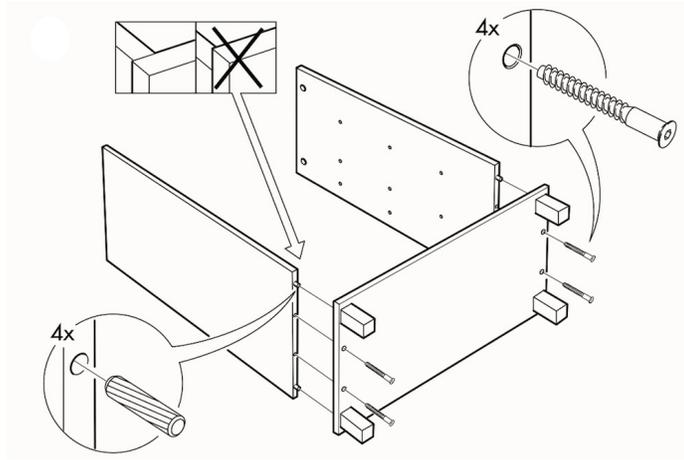
Mishkan Meccano: building a curiosity in the desert

Text 1 – Exodus 25:8-16

5 Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them. Exactly as I show you, the pattern of the Tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, so shall you make it.

10 They shall make an ark of acacia wood, two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high. Overlay it with pure gold

– overlay it inside and out –and make upon it a gold moulding round about. Cast four gold rings for it, to be attached to its four feet, two rings on one of its side walls and two on the other. Make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold; then insert the poles into the rings on the side walls of the ark, for carrying the ark. The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark: they shall not be removed from it. And deposit in the Ark the tablets of the covenant which I will give you.



Text 2 – Rabbi Saul Berman

One likely reason for the great detail is to deter future priests from claiming divine sanction to solicit ever-increasing devotions from the people to further beautify God's Tabernacle. By specifying precisely, in a document available to everyone, what God wants inside the Tabernacle, the Torah helps to forestall the possibility of future corruption.

Text 3 – how written instructions can produce varying results

Quarterly, first and fourth Gules three lions passant gardant in pale Or armed and langued Azure, second quarter Or a lion rampant within a double tressure flory-counter-flory Gules, third quarter Azure a harp Or stringed Argent, the whole surrounded by the Garter; for a Crest, upon the Royal helm the imperial crown Proper, thereon a lion statant gardant Or imperially crowned Proper; Mantling Or and ermine; for Supporters, dexter a lion rampant gardant Or crowned as the Crest, sinister a unicorn Argent armed, crined and unguled Proper, gorged with a coronet Or composed of crosses patée and fleurs de lis a chain affixed thereto passing between the forelegs and reflexed over the back also Or.



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Text 4 – Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild, 2017 (abridged)

There is no woman in parashat Terumah. Indeed there is barely any human presence at all as the bible instructs the people via Moses about the materials needed to build the tabernacle that will travel with them in the wilderness – the mishkan, and all its vessels and accoutrements.

5 There is no woman, but there is God, and it is this aspect of God that I would like to focus upon.

In 25:8 we read: “And they shall make me a mikdash/special place and I will dwell among them/in them.” The notion of God dwelling among/within the people of Israel is a powerful one, one that removes God from any ties to geography or history, but allows God to move freely wherever the people may be. And this idea of God is given a name, one not found in bible itself but found extensively in rabbinic literature post 70CE – Shechinah.

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The Shechinah is an explicitly feminine aspect of God.

According to the Babylonian Talmud,* the Second Temple lacked five things which had been in Solomon’s Temple, namely, the Ark, the cherubim, the sacred fire, the Shechinah and the Urim and Tummim.

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It is easy to see that the Ark of the Covenant, the Cherubim, the sacred fire, the Priestly and mysterious Urim and Tummim were lost by the time of the second Temple; they were artefacts which could disappear. But the Shechinah – that fascinates me. The redactor of Talmud, clearly anxious about the statement, continues the narrative by saying that they were not gone, just less present than before.

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When people pray and study together, when they enact law to help the society, when they are sick and frightened and when they are doing mitzvot that bring joy and comfort, there the Shechinah will be. But when they abuse their power, ignore the other, hold only disdain and triumphalism as their values, it is no wonder that the Shechinah finds it hard to hang around. She wasn’t there in the Second Temple, rife as it was with political machinations and abuses of power. And I only caught a glimpse of her yesterday at Rosh Chodesh Adar when so many Jews were at the Wall, but so few were there to pray from the depths of

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* Yoma 21b

their hearts in joy. I saw her flee from the shrieking women and men determined to drown out prayer. I saw her flee from the passivity of a police force refusing to intervene to protect those who needed their help.

35 But I saw her in the faces of the group of women celebrating a bat mitzvah together in song and dedication, in the sounds of a young girl reading Torah with grace and mature sensitivity.

Text 5 – Clive Lawton, 2016

Was it wrong of me for my heart to fall when I was asked to write about this portion? Weeks and weeks of dramatic narrative and tales of derring-do, only interrupted by sublime legislation and inspirational moral and social challenges, and what do I get? A proto-IKEA flat-pack temple instruction manual – columns
5 and columns of apparently tedious detail about knops (what’s a knop?) and just about the only engaging feature to catch the eye being the extravagant use of ‘sealskin’ (according to my translation anyway – where did they find seals in the wilderness?) or, if you don’t like that, tachash skins from some mythical tachash animal that most commentators don’t want to identify.[†]

10 All my first instincts are to do what our classical commentators do – take refuge in symbolism. It may seem boring, they seem to say, but actually, the planks represent this and the rings represent that and before you know it, hey presto, it’s not about a desert building at all but a manual for social order or moral behaviour or something.

15 But then I got to thinking about the p’shat – the literal meaning, the actual nuts and bolts of it (a phrase which for once is not metaphorical!) What must it have been like?

Obviously the throng of Israelites carried some pretty heavy duty stuff around with them. They were not impoverished and many will have had fine jewellery,
20 beautiful clothes, perhaps quite impressive tents and wagons. But the one thing they didn’t have was a building. Making the mishkan (tabernacle) provided the Israelites with the most surprising thing of all in the wilderness – a lavish building. There was nothing make-shift about the mishkan. Except that it was portable, it had all the features and solidity of a real permanent building – and it was
25 dramatic: colourful, multi-textured, gleaming and glittering in the sun, glowing in the sunset, casting the one non-fluttering shadow as the sun rose across the camp.

What startling wonder it must have provoked! Did the Israelites grow used to it, always around, just another feature of the landscape, or was it always so unlikely,
30 so incongruous, that spotting it out of the corner of your eye, or walking across its

[†] The Talmud helpfully identifies the animal the Torah calls ‘tachash’ as a unicorn: Sanhedrin 28b.

shadow as you went to fetch water or share a spot of manna with a neighbour, it always carried a challenge and a demand?

35 But this thing... can we conceive of any equivalent in our lives today? Does TV and cinema so dull the senses that nothing much surprises us? Have we got so jaded that even last week's oddity becomes this week's commonplace? What is our mishkan? What brings us up short in our ordinary world and reminds us of the utter utterness of God and God's presence amongst us?

40 Perhaps the best we can do in the 21st century, is each week try to find something or somewhere that will play that part of for us and regularly try and experience that gut-stabbing shock of seeing something that absolutely shouldn't be there because it's simply too challengingly real in our transient world.

Text 6 – 'The Domes', Steven Millhauser, 2008 (abridged)

5 The first domes, the precursors, appeared here and there in affluent neighbourhoods, on out-of-the-way roads, where they attracted a certain attention before growing familiar and nearly invisible. The few outsiders who actually witnessed them tended to dismiss them as follies of the rich, comparable to underground heating pipes for winter gardens or basement bowling alleys with automatic pinsetters. Even the early newspaper reports did not quite know what tone to take, shifting uneasily from technical description to ironic commentary, with moments of guarded praise. And that was hardly surprising, since the domes, while having features that were judged to be admirable, displayed themselves in a way that could readily strike an unsympathetic observer as pretentious or irritating.

15 Each of the early models, made of transparent Viviglas, was designed to fit directly over a house and its property. Now, emerging from the front or back door in summer, the owner of a dome could step comfortably into a world of air-conditioned lawns and gardens, thanks to a highly efficient system of filters and evaporator coils built into the Viviglas. There were other advantages. Recessed fluorescent lighting with dimmer switches permitted the property to be illuminated at night, so that you could read a book or newspaper in the cool outdoors on the hottest, muggiest evenings.

20 Just when it seemed that the market for domed houses had reached its limit, a developer decided to enclose several blocks of newly constructed homes on fourteen acres of land, beneath a single dome. The vast span of Splendimax rose not only over individual properties but over a small park with swings, a communal swimming pool, a stretch of oak and beech woods, and nine freshly paved streets.

25 Two weeks later, in a nearby town, a gated community voted to endome itself.

It was during this phase of enlarged domings that the first town voted to enclose itself, in a massive dome that was reputed to be one of the great engineering feats

of the new millennium. And then the United States became endomed. There are a host of benefits: the national regulation of climate, the protection of our coasts
30 against hurricanes, the creation of 24-hour illumination and the consequent elimination of time zones, the Celestilux shield against ultraviolet radiation.

Because everything lies beneath a single dome, because everything is, in a very real sense, indoors, our feelings about Nature are no longer the same. The hills, the streams, the woods, the fields, all have become elements in a new decor, an
35 artfully designed landscape – designed by the mere fact of existing under the Dome. In former days, a distinction was made between inside and outside: people emerged from their homes or apartments and arrived “outside”. Today, one leaves one’s dwelling place and steps into another, larger room. The change is dramatic. The world, perceived as an interior, shimmers with artifice. A tree growing in a
40 park is indistinguishable from a lifelike tree in the corner of a restaurant. A lake in the country is a more artful version of a tiled pool in a mall.

An object that once towered above us – a tall pine, a steep hill, a snow-capped mountain – is itself dwarfed by the Dome, which by the ever-present fact of its vastness miniaturises what it encloses. The Mississippi is nothing but a trickle of
45 water in a child’s terrarium. Events themselves, under such conditions, have receded in importance, have become aestheticised. Experience is beginning to feel like a collection of ingeniously constructed arcade games. Is it because, living beneath the Dome, people are reminded of playful worlds in enclosed and festive spaces, such as movie theatres, bowling alleys and circuses? Indeed, one might
50 argue that under the regime of the Dome, the country has become not a mall but an immense hall of entertainment, in which every citizen is a player. Certain unpleasant facts of life – rundown neighbourhoods, traffic accidents, robberies – are in this view taken less seriously, since they are felt to be part of the artificial displays under the Dome. Death itself is losing its terror, has come to seem little
55 more than a brilliantly contrived effect.

Meanwhile we walk beneath the Celestilux sky, dreaming of new heavens, of impossible architectures. For a change is in the air. You can feel it coming.

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