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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



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The Architecture of Holiness

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From here to the end of the book of Exodus the Torah describes, in painstaking detail and great length, the construction of the Mishkan, the first collective house of worship of the Jewish people. Precise instructions are given for each item – the Tabernacle itself, the frames and drapes, and the various objects it contained – including their dimensions. So for example we read:

“Make the tabernacle with ten curtains of finely twisted linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, with cherubim woven into them by a skilled worker. All the curtains are to be the same size—twenty-eight cubits long and four cubits wide ... Make curtains of goat hair for the tent over the tabernacle—eleven altogether. All eleven curtains are to be the same size—thirty cubits long and four cubits wide ... Make upright frames of acacia wood for the tabernacle. Each frame is to be ten cubits long and a cubit and a half wide ...” (Ex. 26:1-16)

And so on. But why do we need to know how big the Tabernacle was? It did not function in perpetuity. Its primary use was during the wilderness years. Eventually it was replaced by the Temple, an altogether larger and more magnificent structure. What then is the eternal significance of the dimensions of this modest, portable construction?

To put the question more sharply still: is not the very idea of a specific size for the home of the Shekhinah, the Divine presence, liable to mislead? A transcendent God cannot be contained in space. Solomon said so:

“But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this Temple I have built.” (1 Kings 8:27)

Isaiah said the same in the name of God Himself:

“Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where is the house you will build for Me? Where will My resting place be?” Isaiah 66:1

So no physical space, however large, is big enough. On the other hand, no space is too small. So says a striking midrash:

When God said to Moses, ‘Make Me a tabernacle,’ Moses said in amazement, ‘The glory of the Holy One blessed be He fills heaven and earth, and yet He commands, Make me a tabernacle?’ ... God replied, ‘Not as you think do I think. Twenty boards on the north, twenty on the south and eight in the west are sufficient. Indeed, I will descend and confine My presence even within one square cubit.’ (Shemot Rabbah 34:1)

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So what difference could it make whether the Tabernacle was large or small? Either way, it was a symbol, a focus, of the Divine presence that is everywhere, wherever human beings open their heart to God. Its dimensions should not matter.

I came across an answer in an unexpected and indirect way some years ago. I had gone to Cambridge University to take part in a conversation on religion and science. When the session was over, a member of the audience came over to me, a quiet, unassuming man, and said, “I have written a book I think you might find interesting. I’ll send it to you.” I did not know at the time who he was.

A week later the book arrived. It was called 'Just Six Numbers', subtitled 'The deep forces that shape the universe'. With a shock I discovered that the author was the then Sir Martin, now Baron Rees, Astronomer Royal, later President of the Royal Society, the oldest and most famous scientific body in the world, and Master of Trinity College Cambridge. In 2011 he won the Templeton Prize. I had been talking to Britain’s most distinguished scientist.

His book was enthralling. It explained that the universe is shaped by six mathematical constants which, had they varied by a millionth or trillionth degree, would have resulted in no universe or at least no life. Had the force of gravity been slightly different, for example, the universe would either have expanded or imploded in such a way as to preclude the formation of stars or planets. Had nuclear efficiency been slightly lower the cosmos would consist only of hydrogen; no life would have emerged. Had it been slightly higher there would have been rapid stellar evolution and decay leaving no time for life to evolve. The combination of improbabilities was immense.

Torah commentators, especially the late Nechama Leibowitz, have drawn attention to the way the terminology of the construction of the Tabernacle is the same as that used to describe God's creation of the universe. The Tabernacle was, in other words, a micro-cosmos, a symbolic reminder of the world God made. The fact that the Divine presence rested within it was not meant to suggest that God is here not there, in this place not that. It was meant to signal, powerfully and palpably, that God exists throughout the cosmos. It was a man-made structure to mirror and focus attention on the Divinely-created universe. It was in space what Shabbat is in time: a reminder of creation.

“The Tabernacle was a man-made structure to mirror and focus attention on the Divinely-created universe. It was in space what Shabbat is in time: a reminder of creation.”

The dimensions of the universe are precise, mathematically exact. Had they differed in even the slightest degree the universe, or life, would not exist.

Only now are scientists beginning to realise how precise, and even this knowledge will seem rudimentary to future generations. We are on the threshold of a quantum leap in our understanding of the full depth of the words: “How many are your works, Lord; in wisdom You made them all” (Ps. 104:24). The word “wisdom” here – as in the many times it occurs in the account of the making of the tabernacle – means, “precise, exact craftsmanship” (see Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, III:54).

In one other place in the Torah there is the same emphasis on precise dimensions, namely, Noah's ark: “So make yourself an ark of cypress wood. Make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide and thirty cubits high. Make a roof for it, leaving below the roof an opening one cubit high all around” (Gen. 6:14-16).

The reason is similar to that in the case of the tabernacle. Noah's ark symbolised the world in its Divinely-constructed order, the order humans had ruined by their violence and corruption. God was

about to destroy that world, leaving only Noah, the ark and what it contained as symbols of the vestige of order that remained, on the basis of which God would fashion a new order.

Precision matters. Order matters. The misplacement of even a few of the 3.1 billion letters in the human genome can lead to devastating genetic conditions. The famous “butterfly effect” – the beating of a butterfly’s wing somewhere may cause a tsunami elsewhere, thousands of miles away – tells us that small actions can have large consequences. That is the message the Tabernacle was intended to convey.

God creates order in the natural universe. We are charged with creating order in the human universe. That means painstaking care in what we say, what we do, and what we must restrain ourselves from doing. There is a precise choreography to the moral and spiritual life as there is a precise architecture to the tabernacle.

Being good, specifically being holy, is not a matter of acting as the spirit moves us. It is a matter of aligning ourselves to the Will that made the world. Law, structure, precision: of these things the cosmos is made and without them it would cease to be. It was to signal that the same applies to human behaviour that the Torah records the precise dimensions of the Tabernacle and Noah’s ark.

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