

How Many Tents?

The Book of Exodus ends with a confusing paragraph. The Tabernacle has been built and dedicated. The Divine Cloud descends on the Tent of Meeting and the Glory of God fills the Tabernacle. Moshe could not enter the Tent of Meeting and God filled the Tabernacle. And the Children of Israel would only continue their travels when the clouds lifted. Otherwise there was a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night throughout the period of their travels.

Were there two locations? There was the Tent of Assembly, the place where everyone gathered to consult, where “government” and “the judiciary” were based. And in addition the Mishkan, Tabernacle for religious ceremonies. Or were they both the same, just using different terms for different functions? In Solomon’s Temple the judiciary did indeed sit in halls adjacent to the main area of worship and sacrifice.

After the Golden Calf episode the Torah says that Moses removed his own tent to somewhere outside the camp. It was as if he needed to be somewhere where he would not be affected by the tensions and corruption of the camp. The Torah does not say after that if or when he moved his tent back. Possibly he moved into or adjacent to the Tabernacle. Either way the Torah here says that there were times when he could not enter the Tabernacle and so it seems clear that his living quarters were elsewhere. Yet if they were a long distance away, every time he commuted he would have been overwhelmed. So proximity makes sense.

If Moshe could never enter because God’s presence was there, when did he ever get the chance to go inside? Only it seems when they were travelling with the cloud leading the way. That doesn’t make sense. And similarly when would the sacrifices be made if God’s presence was filling the Tabernacle? One way of replying is to say it was a miracle, supernatural and its pointless to ask questions because there are no answers. Traditional commentators come up with different theories to rationalize the texts.

The other way is to look at it symbolically. There’s the physical world, the world of structures and matter. And there is a spiritual world that is represented by fire and cloud, both symbols of something beyond normal bodily experiences. The whole purpose of the Tabernacle was to remind people of the two different spheres of human activity. There is “God’s” space and then there is the human space. They are very different. Just as there always was a private and a public, male and female. And to this day religion deals with both spheres. But in most religions the external building plays the primary role in reminding people of the spiritual. In our tradition it is the inner spirituality represented by the home! That is why the home is called “the little tabernacle.”