



## 5 ways

### to view the Tabernacle

The Tabernacle has been much discussed, described, debated, interpreted in Judaism. For example, here is a taste of five diverse perspectives:

**1.** Rashi (11<sup>th</sup>c., France): The sanctuary is built in honor of the Lord's name. God meets there with the Children of Israel in conversation, like a king who sets a meeting place to speak with his servants.

**2.** Maimonides (12<sup>th</sup>c., Spain, Egypt): The Sanctuary offers spiritual training. It keeps the Israelites from idolatry by limiting cultic sacrifices to the Tabernacle (and later the Temple in Jerusalem) and directing their view to God.

**3.** Nachmanides (13<sup>th</sup>c., Spain, Jerusalem): The Shekinah hovers over the Sanctuary in the pillar of cloud, signifying the consecration of Israel as a holy nation.

**4.** Rabbi S.R.Hirsch, 19<sup>th</sup>c. Ger., Biblical Commentary: The Tabernacle and its intricate details of beauty have symbolic value, representing ideas and principles to be found in the people themselves.

In Jewish mystical tradition the Tabernacle is like a microcosm of the wonders of the universe.

**5.** Malbim, 19<sup>th</sup>c. East. Eur., Biblical Commentary: "It says, 'Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among [or: within] *them*' (25:8)—in *them*, the people, not *it*, the sanctuary. We are each to build a Tabernacle in our own heart for God to dwell in."

Sources: Herczeg, ed., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah: Vol 2* (NY, 1995, 1999); Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Shemos* (NY, 1994).

# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Exodus 27:20—30:10

*Tetzaveh:*  
'you shall instruct'

## Why reflect on Torah?

*"Our two traditions [Judaism and Christianity] are so related that they cannot ignore each other. Mutual knowledge must be encouraged at every level. There is evident, in particular, a painful ignorance of the history and traditions of Judaism, of which only negative aspects and often caricature seem to form part of the stock ideas of many Christians."*

(Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes*, 1985)

Even today, nearly three decades after this Vatican statement appeared, there are Christians who continue to view the ministry of Jesus as a way of love in stark contrast to Judaism as a religion of legalism and ritualism. They are unaware that Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures, the scriptures which were part of Jesus' formation as a Jew, carries a profound sense of God's loving intimacy with his people.

This *Light of Torah* series exists to encourage parishioners in a deeper awareness of Jewish biblical interpretation and how much we can learn from its continuing vitality.



Light of Torah  
[www.lightoftorah.net](http://www.lightoftorah.net)

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## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Exodus 27:20–30:10

Chapter 29 of Exodus ends on a powerful reflection on the meaning and purpose of the Tabernacle. After reading as much of this Torah portion as you can, ponder 29:42-46 with a friend.

Note: In the Torah a range of terms are used to refer to the tent-like structure that signifies God's dwelling among the Israelites, the place where Moses goes to commune with God and bring instruction to the people:

- Tabernacle (*Mishkan*)
- Sanctuary (*Mikdash*)
- Tent (*Ohel*), also called:
  - 'Tent of Appointment'
  - 'Tent of Meeting'
  - 'Tent of Witness'

## Tasting Torah

*"I will meet with the Israelites there [at the entrance of the tent of meeting], and it shall be sanctified by my glory... I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them; I am the Lord their God." (Exodus 29:43, 45-46)*

These verses serve to orientate us lest we get lost in all the raw details of ritual instruction. Ponder 29:42-46 with a friend. Note the repetition of 'meet', 'consecrate', dwell, 'I am the Lord.' Everett Fox comments: *"By 'meeting' with the Children of Israel at the Tent, God's glory makes tent, altar, priests, and most important, the people of Israel, holy."*<sup>1</sup>

## Touching Torah

The Tabernacle has been much discussed by generations of Jewish sages (see overleaf). According to the midrash, even before the creation of the world God was longing and intending to come down from his heavenly abode to dwell among his people. Thus the Tabernacle represents a critical moment in the divine-human relationship. Although the Tabernacle is a finite structure built by human hands, it refers to something that defies containment: God's loving presence amidst his people. The ritual details ultimately refer to intimacy, the desire and commitment of God and Israel to be close to one another.

## Depthing Torah

With your havrutah partner, join the sages in pondering this question: *If God is infinite, how can the Torah point to the Tabernacle as God's dwelling place?* In Jewish mystical tradition this is explained through the concept *Tsimtsum*, a Hebrew term referring to divine 'contraction'. The All-Powerful God, who cannot be contained, willingly withdraws the intensity of divine presence into himself. God does this out of love, to make 'space' for creation, and so that God can come to dwell among the chosen people in their humble earthly setting. In this process of divine 'contraction'—God choosing to be 'smaller' (in a manner of speaking) so as to be more immediately present to his people—the Tabernacle becomes a vital focal point.

Further, Jewish commentators such as Malbim<sup>2</sup> note that the most precious dwelling place for the divine presence is the human person. The most important place for the sanctuary to be built is in human hearts and lives. There each of us must build an altar, lift up our souls and sacrifice our desires for God.

## Doing Torah

Continue to ponder the significance of the Tabernacle, this time in the light of the reference to God *'who brought them out of the land of Egypt'* (29:46). With respect to your own life and the society in which you live, consider the connection between the work of liberation and welcoming divine presence.



## Reflection

*'And the Word became flesh and lived among us'* (John 1:14).

'Lived among us': Here we find an allusion to the Tabernacle built by the Israelites in the wilderness.

How does today's Torah reflection enrich your Christian grasp of this verse from John's Gospel?

1. *The Five Books of Moses*, 420.

2. Malbim: (1809-1880), Russian-Jewish Torah commentator.

Bibliography: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (NY, 1995); Heschel, *Heavenly Torah* (NY/London, 2007); Levine and Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (NY, 2011); Montefiore & Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (NY, 1974); Scripture: NRSV