

SANCTITY IN THE PHYSICAL UNIVERSE

by Rabbi David Algaze

"Let them make a sanctuary for Me-so that I may dwell among them" (Shemot 25:8)

In a monotheistic view of the world, G-d is everywhere. He knows no boundaries, occupies no space and is a totally spiritual force that cannot be bounded by physicality of any type. Why then does Hashem command the Jewish people to build Him a sanctuary in a physical space, with dimensions, orientation and other marks of physical attributes? As Shlomo Hamelech said, "The heavens and the uppermost space cannot contain You, how could this house which I have built?" (I Kings 8) The prophet Isaiah echoes a similar sentiment when he says in G-d's name, "What house can you possibly build for Me and what place of residence?"

Some see in this commandment a concession to human nature which needs physical perception. The case of the Golden Calf exemplifies this tension whereby people cannot be inspired only by an abstract concept and need a physical representation of the universal force and Guiding Power. According to some commentators, it was after this sad experience that Hashem gives Israel this commandment of building a physical sanctuary which will serve their human needs. Seforno suggests that this was a decline in the spiritual power of the Jewish people. Maimonides goes further in suggesting that the building of a physical sanctuary was only a step in the process of weaning Israel from its pagan tendencies.

A very original idea is presented by Rabbi Simcha Zissel of Kelm who presents the concept of a physical space for the Presence of G-d as similar to electrical current. In the case of electricity we find that the power to create light exists wherever there is an electrical connection—even in darkness—and only through man's action we get the production of light. Similarly, in the case of the spiritual and the holy, they exist everywhere. However, it is up to Man to bring them out into the world. G-d is the Light of Creation and it becomes revealed through the efforts of Man's conduct and deeds. He serves as a conduit but also as evidence that the entire Creation is "electrified" with G-d's sanctity, but that it is up to Man to bring it from the potential to actual existence. This is what is meant by "I will dwell among them": by Man's creation of the physical sanctuary, especially when built according to the very precise specifications proclaimed by G-d, the Light of G-d is revealed to all.

Therefore, it is up to us to reveal G-d's light in the world. Each of us can create sanctuaries whereby the Light of G-d can be revealed. In our personal lives we are challenged to act in such a way that the Light of G-d and His presence become revealed to the world.