

Toward a Jewish Architecture: Making Space for God

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Each Rosh Hashanah as I come to this ad-hoc extension of our sanctuary I wonder, not without a little ambivalence, at the often-observed absence of a recognizable and distinct Jewish “style” of architecture, despite our ritual-rich culture and our millennia of synagogue-building.

My own temple experience growing up in the postwar American suburbs was characterized by over-scaled geometric abstractions of grapevines, goblets and menorahs in gold leaf, white travertine and wall to wall orange carpet. Synagogues throughout the world incorporate popular motifs from the cannon of European historicist design. Linear basilicas, colonnaded aisles and pedimented pavilions, for example, are ultimately derived from Christian or Imperial Roman or Classical Greek ways of organizing space and shaping surfaces. Moorish rococo or International Style minimalism have been deployed in some synagogues with greater or lesser success. But none of these styles possesses the conviction of an inevitable lineage of forms traceable to our texts or rituals.

Yet our texts are full of design. The whole second half of the book of Shemot serves as a set of blueprints, elaborating in excruciating detail the means and methods of constructing a place of worship, the functional epicenter of our 40 year journey through the wilderness. While the typical temples and mausolea of other cultures are quintessentially site-specific buildings, the mishkan is unfixd, more an elaborate set of furniture than an enduring edifice. Though the fixtures are meticulous in their definition, their colors vivid in description, together they somehow compose a less than visually memorable document. All together, it forms a curiously tenuous architecture.

The first intimation of this relation to designed space is when Moses is called to Mt Sinai. The proximity to God must be tempered by a safe distance, which God makes very clear how to broach. As will be repeated in the mishkan, the body of Israelites, for their own protection, must stay at a remote location, even from the base of the mount.

After the exodus from Egypt, the first provision God makes for his homeless people is not a physical shelter but a moral one. But at the very moment that God is bestowing on the Israelites His intended normative structure (the Ten Commandments), they are demonstrating themselves to be unworthy by worshiping the golden calf. God’s gift of the rule of law, and of the two-way relationship it implies, seem intended as a rebuke to the materialist and narcissistic proclivities they’re busy indulging. The primary injunctions that follow, the Mishpatim, are themselves a sort of Architecture of Behavior, which configures the interaction between man and God and houses the agreement we make with God and with each other. But they hardly compete with the glamour offered by pyramids or golden idols.

Then, in what seems both a magnanimous concession to the human need for craft, God permits us to perform our affairs in a physical environment. God designs a dwelling for Himself on earth

– a pied a terre. The dwelling place of God, in contrast to the Israelites' persistent homelessness, is specified in glorious detail. And yet, as if to remind us that an almighty God may never actually take up permanent residence in a man-made object, that He may be given only temporary dwelling *amongst us*, the character of the mishkan seems a deliberately under-scaled design. Even and especially given the specificity of instructions, it's ironic and fitting that the Tabernacle is such an anti-monument. It will remain in the Law that we make our home and in which God makes His home freely and permanently with us.

As if to subdue our inclinations to objectify, and transcend the graven image, we are assigned to fashion an empty vessel. The Holy of Holies, at the core of the campus for sacrifice, is a room awaiting a view. And only the high priest may represent us in the achievement.

There are other aspects of the mishkan that resist normal architectural characterization. Though the modes of construction are detailed in their connections and fastenings, they are at the same time scant: curtains, ropes, rods and rings seem to suggest that the boundaries that separate us from the infinite are tenuous and temporary. Though the materials may be opulent (exotic textiles and precious metals), in order to render them useful and appropriate, elaborate processes of modification (forging, weaving, braiding, and working) are ordained. This is a lesson in hallowing. Though the proportions of the mishkan's fabric partitions are modest and the relationship of spaces simple geometries, the concentric organization of functions is fraught with significance, resulting in nothing less than punishment by death for transgressing. Though the absence of a roof over the court, where the non-clergy congregated, might suggest a lesser place in a processional hierarchy, it may also serve to draw into its boundaries the heavens' infinite ceiling.

Though the closely drawn quarters at the center of the space are the exclusively sized, even hermetic Holy of Holies, there is no grand ornamental token mounted within as in the temples of other nations – just the rough hewn and mighty tablets of the Law. And perhaps the inclusion of a roof is less a device to enclose God's seat than one to forge an intimate precinct for the high priest to commune with God, though even his entry is strictly limited. The approach toward this center, where God dwells with and in the Law, is precisely the ideal embodied in our ritual space. Even today, while we generally face east toward Jerusalem, we always orient ourselves toward the ark, wherever it may be.

In his unbuilt design for Congregation Mikvah Israel, the master architect Louis Kahn envisioned a modern sanctuary with its strongest feature being a concentric disposition of people around the liturgical process. Though it's rendered in the stable and timeless medium of masonry, and articulated by daylight, it's less an object than it is an organizing principle. Likewise, the austere beauty of our home sanctuary also concentrates our attention by ascending in ornamental treatment as the locus of action increases toward the center.

And in the even more severe environment of the Ramaz auditorium, I recognize the source of our architecture. Our focus is formed by our enactments: the feeling of enclosure by the rows upon rows of the congregation's seats; the embrace of officers of the service around the chazzan; the orientation of the ark and the lectern across a reserved space from one another, delineating a path and a relationship of fluid equilibrium between them.

Like the modernist treatment of the home as a “machine for living”, this, our own portable sanctuary, is our machine for High Holy Day worship: a device for transcending the physical, the habitual, the fixed and immutable. If you were going to build a Rosh Hashanah-Yom Kippur *machine*, it would look exactly like the mishkan because of what was *done* there. This says less about acacia wood, seal skin and incense than it does about the acts of gathering and procession, rising in song, bowing in contrition, sounding the shofar to honor, recall and comply with God’s mitzvot. It’s a vehicle for approaching more than a destination for arriving. Through the processes of congregating, we render ourselves the major materials in giving shape and meaning to our surroundings. This is our architectural heritage.