

THE MISHKAN AND THE AESTHETIC

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In this paper, I wish to explore the question whether the aesthetic played any role, intentional or *de facto*, in the construction of the *mishkan* (tabernacle), the tent-like portable sanctuary built by the Israelites in the wilderness. The very detailed account of the instructions and actual construction are the subject of the last fifteen chapters of the Book of Exodus. By the “aesthetic” in this context I am referring to certain recognizable features of the objects within the *mishkan* as well as of the *mishkan* as an assembled whole which by virtue of their appearance alone, such as shape, form, color, harmony, provide the spectator with a pleasurable experience and are valued as such. My reasons for thinking that, even if there are aesthetic features they might not have been intended, are as follows.

1) The usual term in Hebrew by which we would describe the visually attractive, *yafeh* (beautiful) or any of its cognates does not appear in connection with the *mishkan* in any of its several phases: in the original instructions given by God to Moses: Exodus 25-28, in the description of its production, Exodus 35:4–38:20, or in the account of its completion, Exodus 38:21–39:43. However, in describing the purpose of the Priestly garments, *and you shall make holy garments [lekavod uletifferet] for honor and splendor* (Ex. 28:2), there is an expression which can be translated as “beautiful.” We shall discuss this later.

2) The entire project of the *mishkan* had a clearly religious purpose: *and let them make Me a sanctuary and I may dwell among them* (Ex. 25:8). The very specific instructions calling for particular materials and precise measurements seem to have been geared to bring about a particular religious effect: *This is the thing which the Lord commanded you to do that the glory of the Lord may appear to you* (Lev. 9:6). If the specifications of the construction plans had some esoteric theological function, then aesthetic considerations would seem to have been irrelevant. Nevertheless, a closer look reveals certain passages

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which clearly point to the presence of aesthetic features and suggest the possibility that they were intended.

A) Consider the list of materials that were called for: *Gold, silver and brass, fabrics made of blue, purple and scarlet (dyed wool), fine linen, goats' hair, seal skins, ram skins dyed red, acacia wood, spices for oil and incense, precious stones* (Ex. 25:3-7). The wood was to be used for the wall planks, the brass and silver for sockets, clasps and connecting-bars, the fabrics for curtains, and the animal skins for roof covering – all functional uses. However, the large amount of gold, the precious stones, and the liberal use of color clearly point to a desire for their attractive visual effects. While the overall purpose of the *mishkan* was to serve God, and all of its furniture designed for that purpose (the ark to hold the tablets, the altar upon which to bring offerings, the table upon which to place the shew bread, the menorah to give light), some of their visual features could only be described as decorative and aesthetic.

B) Consider the workers called upon to execute the intricate plans: *And let every wise-hearted man among you come and make all that the Lord has commanded . . .* (Ex. 35:10). *And all the women that were wise-hearted did spin with their hands* (Ex. 35:25). This was a call for “workers” skilled in the basic crafts needed to build the tent-like portable structure and its furniture as stipulated. However, in introducing the individuals who would be supervising the project, the text is quite extravagant in its description of the special talents of Bezalel ben Hur of the Tribe of Judah: *I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom and in understanding, and in knowledge and in all manner of workmanship to devise skillful works, to work in gold and silver and in bronze and in the cutting of stones for setting and in carving of wood to work in all manner of skillful workmanship* (Ex. 35:30-34).

The text seems to be struggling to articulate that special quality (artistic) in a person that enables him to produce objects which would be judged to be beautiful. While the term ‘wise of heart’ (Ex. 35:10, 25) found earlier is used to describe practical skills, here the text invokes all of the strong cognitive terms: “wisdom,” “understanding,” “knowledge” (*hokhma, bina, da'at*) because it wishes to reference creative, artistic abilities. This reflects the belief that in all complex human endeavors the idea precedes the action: *lakhshov makhsavot la'asote* – “to think thoughts to make.” At that time, the artistic was not considered a unique faculty but simply a high order of “making”

(*techné*) so that the appropriate Biblical term becomes a type of workmanship involving mind and imagination (*melechet machshevet*).

C) A third element supporting the aesthetic theses is the frequent reference to Moses as having been shown a pattern (*tavnit*) while on the mount: once in connection with the making of the menorah (Ex. 25:40), again in connection with the boards which enclosed the tabernacle (Ex. 26:30) and in discussing the bronze altar (Ex. 27:8). It is generally assumed that the time Moses was sequestered on the mountain was spent learning the meaning and implications of the commandments he was to give to Israel. As Moses later remembers it, *and the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and ordinances that you might do them in the land . . .* (Deut. 4:14). These then were in terms of words and concepts but hardly any pictures. ‘*For you saw no manner of form (temunah)*’ (Deut. 4:15). Yet in referring to the instructions given to Moses on Mt. Sinai regarding the *mishkan*, there is this clear reference to having been shown a picture (*temunah*)! But, perhaps once you are striving for the aesthetic in the visual arts, that is a subtle quality that cannot be caught in verbal instructions alone. The ability to envision the finished product may be a necessary condition for the emphasis on constructing exactly as seen in the “picture” (in this case truly more powerful than 1000 words!). This may signal the involvement of the aesthetic.¹

An additional hint of the text’s awareness of the aesthetic in the construction of the *mishkan* may lie in a seemingly prosaic observation in connection with the completion of its outer structure. The concluding words are, *so the mishkan was one [echad]* (Ex. 36:8-19). One of the recognized characteristics of an aesthetic experience, be it of a poem, a painting or a symphony, is that it exhibits a quality of unity, that is, that all of its parts fit together, that nothing is superfluous and nothing missing. This is considered a necessary condition for the aesthetic in whatever medium. So while the test of the *religious* efficacy of the completed *mishkan* was the appearance of the Divine Presence (*shechina*), the test of its aesthetic success was in the sense of unity, oneness, in viewing the assembled whole, the recognition of beauty, balance, symmetry and proportion in the individual items of furniture in the *mishkan* (as we shall show below).

Of all the furniture in the *mishkan*, the two objects that clearly call for artistic talent in their creation and an aesthetic sense in their appreciation are the menorah and the cherubim. The instructions for the menorah take up ten

complex verses (Ex. 25:31-40), while the cherubim, which were part of the Ark cover, are given in four verses (Ex. 25:17-20). Both objects are four dimensional figures to be made of “pure gold of one piece” (Ex. 25:31). The sheer impact of the glittering gold already imparts to its appearance a visual delight much before the mind can ascribe any meaning whatsoever. By contrast, the familiar structure of the Ark, the Table and the altar declare their identity and their obvious function, although further contemplation may reveal artistic elements.² However, the appearance of the cherubim with their outstretched wings and human faces³ make no immediate suggestion as to identity or function except perhaps as offering some kind of protection, *screening the Ark cover with their wings* (Ex. 25:20). It follows, therefore, that what were being highlighted here, were the aesthetic elements of form, balance, drama and gracefulness of two imaginary, possibly celestial creatures *with their wings spread out on high and their faces one to another* (Ex. 25:20). Of course, as suggested above, their presence on the cover (*kaporet*) and their outstretched wings seem to indicate a protective function. However, the innate Divine power of the Ark’s contents belies the need for further “protection”. So perhaps they are there for their aesthetic value! In contrast, the very name of the *menorah* (candlestick), and as well as the text’s plain statement, reveals its essential function, which is to give forth light (Num. 8:1, 2). If so, then all that was needed were a number of flat clay oil lamps which were then in common use. Why a tall candelabra with seven branches, a stem, and a base intricately decorated with *cups, knobs and flowers* (Ex. 25:31), all of one piece of pure gold?! While the traditional commentators seek religious allusions in the number seven and in its other details, the specific instruction for the design and placing of the obviously decorative elements, *cups, knobs and flowers* have prompted even a conservative scholar such as Rashi to acknowledge that “they were there only as ornaments (*le-noi*)” (on Ex. 25:31). Thus, while the *menorah* was an artifact which had a very particular function in an important daily ritual, its shape and ornamentation exhibited principles of symmetry, balance, and proportion affording a pleasurable aesthetic experience.

We turn now to the Priestly garments. While, as we noted, the *mishkan*, as a whole, is given a metaphysical purpose: ‘*And you shall make for Me a sanctuary and I will dwell among them*’ (Ex. 25:8), the purpose of the Priestly garments is given in very practical terms,⁴ *lekavod uletifferet*, ‘for honor

and splendor' (Ex. 28:2.) In addition to the gold and colored fabrics, the High Priest's garments included the use of precious stones set in gold on his shoulder-pieces, twelve different types of precious stones set in rows of three on a gold breastplate held by rings and chains of gold. This was set off by a tall cleft head dress. A plate of pure gold engraved with the words "Holy to the Lord," was to be worn on his forehead.⁵ While the conspicuous positioning of the head-plate proclaimed the religious character of its wearer, the overall visual impression was one of "splendor" and "beauty." The image of the High Priest in all his vestments was indeed a dazzling sight to which the artistic elements of color, form and harmony contributed. Just as in poetry the meaning of the words enhance the pleasurable experience of their sounds and rhythm, so too, the religious significance of this individual as one who stands before God in the name of his people gives depth to the purely aesthetic effects.

From all of the above it may be concluded that not only are there unmistakable aesthetic elements in the instructions for the construction of the *mishkan* and the garments of the High Priest, but that they are there by design. This, albeit, tacit recognition of the artistic values faithfully reflect Judaism's general view of the aesthetic: the aesthetic is to be enjoyed as a Divine gift, it is to be cultivated as a uniquely human skill, and it may appropriately adorn one's offerings to the Almighty.⁶ Indeed, the Creation story itself hints at an aesthetic dimension to nature. Thus: '*And God saw everything that He had made and behold it was very good*' (Gen. 1:31). The repeated need for a visual confirmation by God of the fulfillment of His creative utterances (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) suggests that the pronouncement of *very good* by God in viewing His completed universe included a perception and appreciation of the aesthetic value of the planet's vivid colors: the brightness of light and fire, the white clouds against blue skies, the blue-green of oceans, the green of vegetation. The symbolic importance of color can be seen in the role assigned to the rainbow in the covenant made by God with humanity after the Flood. *I have set my [rain]bow in the clouds and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth...that the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh" . . . and the [rain]bow shall be in the cloud* (Gen.9:13-16).

Commentators have struggled to understand the connection between the rainbow and the promise to no longer bring a flood upon the earth. A possible

explanation might be to view the band of beautiful colors arcing across the sky after a fierce storm as saying: The heavens now smile down upon you, behold the joy of color! There is no greater expression of the benevolence of the Creator than this gratuitous phenomenon whereby light rays of different wave lengths produce pleasurable sensations in the human brain. Moreover, it is the very measurable, graduated nature of light and sound waves that enable them to be the raw material out of which artists, down through the ages, have developed the arts of music and painting. This surprising fact that conditions of nature on our (as far as we know) unique planet make for the possibility of the aesthetic as an experience for man both as consumer and producer, is a gift from He who is the source of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

NOTES

1. There are other biblical references where Moses may have been shown something visual to elucidate the instructions being given him. One is Exodus 12:2: *This month shall be unto you the beginning of months...the first of the year*. Here Moses' attention may have been drawn to the new moon, visible above. Also Leviticus 14:2: *This shall be the law of the leper (metzora)*. Since diagnosis of this disease required being able to distinguish colors, the different conditions had to be illustrated. The Hebrew word *zote* (this) is understood here as denoting direct demonstration; that is, pointing to something.
2. The *golden crown to the border* (Ex. 25:25) around the table seems non-functional as do the horns of the four corners of the altar which were overlaid with brass (Ex. 27:2).
3. According to the Rabbis, the cherubim had the faces of children. See Rashi on Exodus 25:18.
4. Of course, the word *kavod*, strictly translated, means "for honor," i.e. "that which brings honor . . ." and *tiferet* means "that which brings pride." "Honor" and "pride" to its wearer, the High Priest and ultimately, to God. However, what the spectator sees and experiences can be described as "splendid," "beautiful," "grand," "glorious," even "magnificent," in short – an aesthetic experience.
5. In addition to the visual splendor of the Priest, there was an auditory element. Around the bottom of the robe were a series of "pomegranates" made of blue, purple, and scarlet wool and between them "bells of gold" . . . *golden bell and pomegranate, golden bell and pomegranate*" (Ex. 28:33). Regardless of the ritual purpose that may have been assigned to the bells, their tinkling sound as the Priest walked certainly had aesthetic value.
6. See S. Spero, "Judaism and the Aesthetic," in *New Perspectives in the Theology of Judaism* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013) p. 275.