

This week's parashah, Terumah, contains the instructions for building the *mishkan*, the place for the divine presence to dwell. But it's not one structure. If you close read the parasha, you will see that it contains instructions for an for the ark of the covenant, a table, a menorah, and altar, a structure for these items, and an enclosure to surround the items; each item rendered in fabulous detail.

As I was studying the parashah, what caught my eye was the description of the cover of the Ark. This is the ark that is to contain the *luchot*, the tablets of the commandments. It is the famous ark from *Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

The entire ark is made of gold, but here the description of its cover, from Exodus 25, verses 18-22, as Hashem is instructing Moshe:

Make two cherubim of gold—make them of hammered work—at the two ends of the cover. ¹⁹ Make one cherub at one end and the other cherub at the other end; of one piece with the cover shall you make the cherubim at its two ends. ²⁰ The cherubim shall have their wings spread out above, shielding the cover with their wings. They shall confront each other, the faces of the cherubim being turned toward the cover. ²¹ Place the cover on top of the Ark, after depositing inside the Ark the Pact that I will give you. ²² There I will meet with you, and I will impart to you—from above the cover, from between the two cherubim that are on top of the Ark of the Pact...:

I got very fixated on these cherubim – what are they? Why are there two? Why does God speak from the space between them?

The first time we meet a cherub in Torah is in Parashat Beresheet, when the humans are exiled from Eden. It is this same kind of entity, a *karuv* in Hebrew, that is stationed to prevent their return. So a *Karuv*, a cherub can be a kind of guardian.

But to the extent that these cherubim are guarding the ark, they are not doing so with a threatening posture. They are facing inwards, wings outstretched.

(pass around various renderings)

Several commentators note the significance of their posture; particularly Sforno, who says: The reason why the Torah continues in describing these cherubs as facing the lid of the Ark, i.e. looking downwards whereas their wings are spread upwards, is a reminder that although inspiration originates in heaven, understanding of G'd and how He works can only come by paying close attention and studying what God does in our material, "lower" part of the universe. The ideal means of unraveling the meaning of G'd's actions is through the revealed word, the Torah, of which the Ark has become the repository.

Likewise, HaEmek Davar teaches, they look toward the ark-cover. "To teach us that the vision of the Holy One and Israel, together, is toward the Torah in the ark, and this is what explains [the saying that] the Holy One, and Israel, and the Torah are one, as it is known."

This suggests that the cherubs are supposed to direct our focus. As we look at them, we see them not looking back at us, but down towards the Ark of the covenant, and that reminds us that the point of all the bling that is the mishkan is actually the treasure contained within, not a material treasure, but words inscribed on simple stone.

But you would only need one cherub pointing into the ark to send that message; we have two. And their posture isn't just facing down, but towards each other; as the text in verse 20 says; "Confronting each other," or literally as the Hebrew says, וּפְנֵיהֶם אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו, and their faces each to its brother. And they don't just direct our attention totorah, but as the text says, *Hashem meets with Moshe from between the two Karuvim.*

There is a teaching on this in the Talmud, in Masechet Rosh Hashanah: Rosh Hashana 31a: **From the Ark cover** the Divine Presence traveled **to the cherub**, and **from cherub to cherub**, and **from the second cherub to the threshold**, as it is written: **“And there I will meet with you, and I will speak to you from above the Ark cover**, from between the two cherubs.” I like how this teaching imagines divine revelation as some sort of electrical current, and the karuvim as divine transmitters and receivers, perhaps even, as we might say in a completely contemporary metaphor router extension that amplify the transmission.

The scholarly website Thetorah.com gives a great survey of various commentators and the significance that they respectively ascribe to the karuvim. Two of my favorites are:

Rav Chaim Paltiel suggests that the two statues represent the two attributes of God, mercy and justice.^[9]

Rav Jacob ben Asher (the *Ba'al haTurim*) believes they represent two study partners in a *beit midrash*, having a give and take about Torah.

And many other midrashim that I found in my own explorations suggest that they took the physical form of children, and that their facing each other signified the kind of innocent love that children are capable of.

Now, the mystical divine attributes of mercy and justice, chavruta partners in a study hall, and young children all have very different connotations, but what they have in common is that they are *relational*, like the karuvim facing each other.

Whether you like the idea of divine transmission coming from the balance between justice and mercy, or from the insight that comes when two earnestly argue, or from the love between two children playing together, what all of these metaphors suggest is that divinity dwells in interstitiality; in a fundamental *betweenness*.

The Karuvim and all of their interpretations suggest that the whole project of the mishkan, of building a sacred structure in which God can dwell, is not so much about the objects as about the sacred interactions that might occur in the spaces between. In fact, the karuvim suggest to me that perhaps the point of the entire mishkan was the interactions that it required, not only in its construction, but in its constant set-up and take-down as the portable sanctuary in the wilderness, and in the ways that people might behave more consciously as they navigated around it.

We do not, today, live in a community at whose center is a physical ark, with physical karuvim directing our attention to it and divine messages emanating from between them.

But it is still the case that we find divinity through making space for each other, whether to consider another's opinion in an argument, or seeking the balance of opposing values, or making time for loving play with each other.

I would suggest that as our world becomes ever more profane, our task is to remember that any interaction has the potential to be sacred space.