Breaking New Spiritual Ground: Thoughts for Parashat Terumah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Terumah

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

This week's Torah reading includes very specific instructions for building the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary that served as the religious center of the Israelites during their time in the wilderness. Was this construction something absolutely new for the Israelites, or did they already have an idea of what a sanctuary should look like based on their experience in Egypt?

Professor Joshua Berman of Bar Ilan University, in his excellent book *Ani Maamin*, offers a fascinating insight into the design of the Mishkan. He provides a historical model that likely was familiar to the ancient Israelites.

In 1274 BCE, Rameses II—Pharaoh of Egypt—won a great victory against Egypt's archrival, the Hittite empire, in the battle of Kadesh. The event was so impressive that battle monuments were erected across the Egyptian empire. Ten copies of the inscriptions exist to this day, and there is good reason to believe that the contents of these inscriptions were widely circulated throughout the Egyptian population, including the Israelites. Several of the bas-reliefs include an image of Rameses's camp at Kadesh.

Scholars have noted the following facts about the battle compound of Rameses II. "The camp is twice as long as it is wide. The entrance to it is in the middle of the eastern wall….At the center of the camp, down a long corridor, lies the entrance to a 3:1 rectangular tent. This tent contains two sections: a 2:1 reception tent, with figures kneeling in adoration, and leading westward (right) from it, a domed square space that is the throne tent of the pharaoh….In the throne tent…the emblem bearing the pharaoh's name and symbolizing his power is flanked by falcons….with their wings spread in protection over him" (*Ani Maamin*, pp. 57-58).

The structure of Rameses's battle compound is remarkably similar to the structure of the Mishkan, in terms of layout, proportions, separation of reception tent and an inner sanctum where the central figure is flanked by beings with wings spread over. Was this simply a coincidence?

Aside from the visual similarities of the Rameses compound and the Mishkan, Dr. Berman demonstrates how the "Kadesh poem," composed to celebrate Rameses's victory, has a number of

singular similarities to the Az Yashir poem sung by the Israelites upon their redemption from Egypt. Could there be a connection between these two works?

Dr. Berman suggests that the Israelites were aware of the depiction of Rameses's battle compound…and the Mishkan's design was influenced by this. The Israelites were aware of the "Kadesh poem," and the Az Yashir's use of language and imagery was influenced by this.

While some may find this problematic as undermining the originality of the Torah, Dr. Berman draws the opposite conclusion. The Torah employed images and language that were familiar to the Israelites…but then directed these factors into a new religious context. Yes, the Mishkan was structured like Rameses's battle compound, but at the center was the holy ark of Israel…not an image of Pharaoh. Whereas the battle compound glorified Pharaoh and treated him as a deity, the Israelite Mishkan glorified the one true God and was dedicated to the worship of God…not Pharaoh. Likewise, in the Az Yashir, the Torah utilized phrases and images that the Egyptians had used to glorify Pharaoh…but the Torah directed these phrases and images only to God, not to any human being, not to Pharaoh.

Thus, the Torah broke new religious ground by taking existing Egyptian images and symbols and transforming them into an entirely new religious worldview that fostered worship of one God of supreme power. It used images and language that would have resonated with the Israelites of ancient Egypt, but used them in such a way as to lead them away from idolatry and toward monotheism.

Dr. Berman notes that the Torah should be studied with an awareness of the historical context in which its narratives took place. By doing so, we not only understand the Torah more accurately, but we also better appreciate the Torah's revolutionary advances in religious thought.