

## The Second Tent

*Edward Elkin*

**M**y story is of two tents. Both tents are featured in the Torah, and both play crucial roles in the religious life of the children of Israel as they journey through the desert.

One *ohel moed* is by far the more famous. It stands right in the center of the camp. It is the Mishkan, the tabernacle which was constructed by the great artisan Bezalel with the contributions of the people. When God wanted the Israelite camp to remain stationary, a cloud hovered over this Tent; when God wanted the camp to move, the cloud lifted. The Tent was surrounded on three sides by various levite clans, and on the fourth by Moses, Aaron, and Aaron's sons. Here the kohanim performed the sacrifices commanded by the Lord. This was the location of the Holy of Holies, which only the High Priest could enter on one day of the year—Yom Kippur.

Into the enclosure of the Tent itself only Moshe could go, and this is where he received communications from the Lord. In short, this Tent stood at the center of Israelite religious life. In its capacity as the dwelling place of the Lord among the people of Israel, it possessed tremendous sanctity and needed to be guarded from the defilement of the impure. It was a powerful and fearsome place, a place not to be messed with, one of those rare places where the Transcendent Deity burst through to the human realm.

But there was a second tent reported in the Book of Exodus. Though it got a lot less press, it served an equally important function. It was also a place where God and Humanity met, but it was of a very different character from the first.

*U-Moshe yikach et ha-ohel ve-natah lo michutz la-machaneh,  
harchek min ha-machaneh, ve-kara lo ohel moed, ve-hayah kol  
mevakesh Hashem yetzei el ohel moed asher michutz la-machaneh.  
Now Moses would take the Tent and pitch it outside the camp, at*

*some distance from the camp. It was called the Tent of Meeting, and whoever sought the Lord would go out to the Tent of Meeting that was outside the camp. (EXODUS 33:7).*

This tent too was called *ohel moed*, but it was clearly very different from the first. This tent was pitched not at the center of the camp, surrounded by layers of holy people who protected it from the masses, but rather, *michutz la-machaneh*, outside the camp altogether. Who visited this second tent? Not just Moses and Aaron, but *kol mevakesh Hashem*—whoever was seeking the Lord. Anyone from among *bnei Yisrael* could go to that tent and establish his or her own direct spiritual connection to Hashem. There was no priesthood here, no elaborate ritual, no sacred appurtenances of silver or gold. It was a tent—modest, simple, on the periphery of the camp. So peripheral that one could read Exodus 33 and not even realize it was there. If you blink, you miss it. And yet that was the place where the people could meet God.

Two tents. What can they mean? Represented in these two tents are two different models of the religious life which remain as alternatives even in our own day. The first model: centralized, professional, formal, beautiful, awe-inspiring, yet, despite its presence right in the center of the camp, very distant from the life of the simple Jew. The second model: open, unguarded, populist, devoid of pomp or formal ritual of any kind, barebones. Despite being *harchek min ha-machaneh*, at a distance from the camp, this was the most accessible religious place for the people.

Interestingly, Moses too speaks to God in the second tent. In fact it is there that he has his most intimate encounter with God, *panim el panim, kaasher yedaber ish el re'ehu*, “face to face, as one man speaks to another” (EXODUS 33:11), to quote the Torah’s daringly anthropomorphic image. When Moses would go out to the second tent for these encounters, the Torah tells us that all the people would rise and bow low, each at the entrance of his tent.

What motivated this tribute the text doesn’t tell us. Perhaps when Moses went to the people’s tent he affirmed that, despite his holiness and his ability to speak to God *panim el panim*—at the end of the day, he was still one of the people. As when a royal or a prime minister or a baseball hero or movie star plunges into the crowd to shake hands—we’re moved by the bridging of their world of riches and power and glory with our much simpler world. Avi-

vah Gottlieb Zornberg, in *The Particulars of Rapture*, imagines “the hungry gaze of the people” as they watch Moses walk to the second *ohel moed*, their simple people’s tent, from the vantage point of the entrances to their own tents. For Zornberg, such a powerful moment evokes in each person, in his or her own existential solitude, a process of revision, or teshuvah. “The

image of the camp as a constellation of tent-flaps, each holding its occupant, its gaze, compellingly conveys inwardness as a general experience.” (p. 440) That is what the second tent is about—inwardness, self-reflection, the kind of repentance that can only take place in private.

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As a rabbi, I think a lot about Jewish worship. Is the ideal davenning experience closer to a Tent I experience, or a Tent II experience?

If it’s the first, then the emphasis and the energy should be on those in charge mounting a highly professional, uplifting service on behalf of everyone else. Every ritual would be carried out in the proper way, because only those with knowledge and credentials would have power to shape the experience. There would be an atmosphere of awe in the room, as the ancient formal rites of our people are carried out in accordance with tradition. These rituals would be situated at the very center of our lives, the most public place in our community.

If it’s the second, then the emphasis and the energy should be on the subjective experience of every individual present. Those in charge wouldn’t be doing the ritual on anyone’s behalf. Each person would be there *levakesh et Hashem*, to seek God in her or his own private way, based on their own very individual journeys—the friendships made or broken, the scholarly and professional goals achieved or not, the loves that were kindled, nurtured, or that died, the health problems contended with or overcome, the loss of loved ones experienced, the ethical quandaries faced, the sins committed, the temptation to sin overcome, the deep fears for one’s own safety and well-being as well as for those we love, the anger we feel at those who would harm us, at our loved ones, at God, at ourselves.

All these are material for the second tent, where there's no clergy, no rituals, no trumpets blasting, no stained glass windows, no masks. The communal nature of what happens in the second tent model is limited to that gaze from our own tent flaps, the inspiration we gain from seeing others walk the walk to the tent. But the power only happens when we are moved by that inspiration to emerge from our own tents and seek God ourselves, privately, at a distance from everyone else in our lives.

In my view, I can say that as hard as it is to stage a good Tent I experience—and it does take a tremendous amount of work and skill to do so—facilitating a good Tent II experience is yet much harder. Anita Diamant speaks of the danger of rabbis becoming “spiritual or religious chauffeurs, taking [people] only where they want to go, avoiding any turn that takes us through the slums.” Each davener has to take the wheel at some point, and take a tour through his or her own neighborhoods, whatever they look like. If the rabbi attempts to do all the work of getting the worshiper to these places, not only will the rabbi inevitably fail, but he or she will be colluding with the infantilizing trend that has characterized and compromised so much of contemporary Jewish religion. We can, at our professional best, move people through our words and our music and our poetry. But if the service doesn't at least point worshipers in the direction of the places they need to go on their own, then the moment the rabbi is gone, there's nothing left to sustain the religious connection.

I often have occasion to speak with people who haven't done much with their Judaism since becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Although they probably wouldn't articulate it this way, it often sounds like what really turned them off was that they experienced Judaism as a purely first tent phenomenon—long on pomp and formality and structure, short on intimacy and accessibility, completely unable to deal with the subjective experience of the individual.

Why have the impresarios of Jewish worship found this subjective second tent aspect so difficult? At least three reasons: First is our legacy from our ancestors: we are heirs to a fixed liturgy. As Rabbi David Hartman has observed, the new bridegroom, and the mother who has just buried her child, both recite the same Amidah. How can the same liturgy be applicable to people who are at such different spiritual places? The instinct of our tradition has always been to guard our fixed common liturgy and trust that

individuals in all their variety and at all their different stages of life will be able to pour their own subjectivity, their own *neshamas*, into these common prayers, deriving both the sincerity of personal meaning and the comfort of community from those shared words. But it's not easy for everyone to find that personal connection in our ancient Hebrew prayers. The recitation of a fixed liturgy lends itself more naturally to a Tent I style of worship, because the words are emanating not from the pray-er but rather from an external source shared by everyone in the community.

The second difficulty with Tent II is that many service leaders don't know how to "do second tent" effectively. Tent II is by definition hard to establish in a communal setting. How do we, in the context of a public service, facilitate the honest outpouring of the soul by individual worshippers?

The third obstacle to experiencing Jewish worship as a truly personal opportunity to connect with God is probably the most important. It has to do with the resistance each of us brings to shining a glaring light on the truth of our lives. Honesty does not necessarily require that we give up the myths by which we live, but it does require that we periodically acknowledge and reckon with them. Each of us has our own list of the illusions and fantasies and errors that will be exposed the moment we enter the Second Tent, our own list of the masks and poses that will be stripped off. In that tent, each of us needs to ask the kind of tough questions we usually avoid: What kind of person am I? What are the values I actually live by, as opposed to the ones I talk about? What are my most deeply felt obligations—to family, to community, to people, to society, to myself, to God? Which of these obligations have I met, and which have I failed to live up to? Whom have I hurt? What must I do to change for the better? These are hard questions to ask, which is why the second tent is so hard for us to enter.

With all these obstacles standing in the way, we must ask: is it even desirable to try and combine Tent I and Tent II into one worship service? After all, the very fact that the two ancient tents were separate might lead us to conclude that these two experiences are so different that they cannot be merged in time and location. In fact, contemporary society offers all kinds of opportunities for Tent II type experiences for the individual Jew—ranging from the psychologist's couch to eastern techniques of meditation to healing circles to spiritual retreat centers.

While these and others might be useful in helping the individual Jew establish a personal connection with God, I still believe that the worship service should not give up on helping individuals to achieve that goal as well, should not surrender completely to the formalism with which it is so comfortable. The service needs to be about *kavannah* [spontaneity, intention-ality] as much as it is about *keva* [fixed liturgy]. Despite all the distractions, and despite the intimidation factor always present in a service that is so long and so intricate, the liturgy can provide a context for Tent II experiences, if the prayer leaders validate this function and if the worshipers are open to it.

At its best, the worship service merges the two tents. There is public ceremony, performed in a beautiful and professional way in accordance with our traditions. We need that. We need the structure of Jewish time, the limits and the boundaries which Judaism helps us to mark. But Jewish worship is also about the private stuff that goes on in each of our hearts. Shuls don't have a separate tent for that private stuff, but each of us can find a place inside ourselves where we can come closer to God, inspired by what we've seen and experienced. In this way the tents come to reinforce each other rather than compete with each other, nurturing the spiritual life of the individual and the community.



Rabbi Edward Elkin is the spiritual leader of the First Narayever Congregation, a traditional-egalitarian synagogue in Toronto.