Today we complete the book Shemot. Looking back over it, we find an apparently straightforward story. Shemot climbs from slavery in Egypt to revelation at Sinai, then slides down again into the desert, but this time with a mishkan, a dwelling place for HaShem. As the book closes, the mishkan accompanies the People in their wandering in the wilderness/B’Midbar, toward Canaan.

On taking a second look, the story raises a question: what was the mishkan for? Was a mishkan in HaShem's original plan for the Erev Rav when they packed their bags in Egypt? Or was it an emergency patch, an unplanned, ad hoc attempt to respond to the sin of Avodah Zarah, the worship of the calf of gold? Was the mishkan an answer to the calf – worshiped precisely as the liberating deity by those dancers so impatient with Moshe for being on the mountaintop - or was it a prior necessity, to assure that HaShem would always be close to the people?

If you read the text as following a series of events as they occurred, then it looks like the mishkan is not a late reaction to the calf, but an early plan. The sequence [in ten steps, how else?] is:

1] Revelation of 10 commandments to Moshe on Sinai.
2] Revelation of four more: all of these say, do not make a special stone place for HaShem; HaShem will come to wherever sacrifice is made.
3] Revelation to Moshe of instructions for the mishkan, designed from the inside out, starting with the Aron and Keruvim, ending with the outer curtains and covers.
4] Sin of the golden calf while Moshe is still on Sinai.
5] Destruction of the tablets; death of idolaters by Levite and by plague.
6] Negotiation by Moshe with HaShem; HaShem relents and agrees to stay with the People.
7] Moshe returns to Sinai, gets a second set of ten commandments.
8] Moshe commands the assembly of a mishkan pretty much according to the plans already given, but this time the assembly proceeds from the outside in.
9] Moshe activates the completed Mishkan by proper Levite sacrifices.
10] When Moshe is done, it works! That is, HaShem responds by residing in a cloud within the mishkan:
40:34. "Vayechal Moshe et ha melacha va'y'chas he'anen et ohel moed uch'vod HaShem malei et ha mishkan." / "When Moshe finished the work the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the presence of HaShem filled the tabernacle."

Rashi says that the chronology of the text is misleading, and that the mishkan is a late compensation for our failure to hear and do what we had been told at the first revelation. He says we should read the sequence as a transposition of the order of things, and that the events really occurred in the order [4], then [3]. That is, that the instructions, and the building of the mishkan, both followed the episode of the egel tzahav.

This is an attractive argument, since so many of the steps in the building of the mishkan seem to teach the error of the egel [the use of gold, the Levites chosen to make sacrifices]. Also, this would eliminate the need to explain away those four extra commandments earlier on [step 2], which seem to argue against anything like a mishkan. But this would also argue that there might not have been the intention that we always be accompanied by a mishkan.

Ramban says not to worry, it reads as it happened, and that HaShem did intend us from that moment on always to have a mishkan, that is, a place for proper sacrifice as a way to come close to HaShem. He points to the earlier list of three Chagim, where we are to bring our harvests to the place where HaShem dwells, and not come empty-handed.

Rav Lichtenstein of Yeshiva Har Etzion agrees: he says that Rashi is right, but only in a technical sense, and that Ramban is right in the deeper sense. He says that because of the sin of the egel, HaShem changed a few things between the design plan in step [3] and the actual construction in steps [7-8]. But, he says, that is no different form the way HaShem changed the commandments, from the first set in Shemot to the second in Devarim. He concludes with Ramban that the HaShem’s plan always was to reside among us on our journeys.

I hope that Ramban and Rav Lichtenstein are right in their optimism, and that we may hope for a mishkan among us even today. In Jewish terms, we certainly dwell in a Wilderness, but then, where is our mishkan? We live in a time of only partial understanding of HaShem’s intentions; can we also find a mishkan with this partial vision? How do we go about providing a place for HaShem to dwell among us, as we make our own journey today?

We will each have our own answer; mine is this. HaShem will reside among us when our communal and individual lives are sufficiently rich in service to others – in the sacred sacrifice of our time and our wealth – to bring us into resonance with those of our ancestors who made their sacrifices in that mishkan, at that time.

Such a mishkan, however partial or poorly understood, would be around us only when we were able to maintain our lives in a special tension with the world, the tension that emerges from following the commandments both individually and communally, while also remaining engaged in our journeys. This mishkan would not be among us, were we to let the wilderness of our day be an excuse for setting the commandments aside as too hard or too Jewish a set of expectations. Nor would it be among us, were we
to let the commandments be an excuse for simply settling down in the wilderness, rather
than doing the work of living by these commandments while on a journey through the
wider world we find ourselves in.

Pesach is coming, so here are four questions to help locate a mishkan among us
today. Each comes from my own work at living a life inside this necessary tension.

1)

Is the mishkan to be found in a Hillel? Only imperfectly, at best, but that is still a
hopeful answer. The risk is that Hillels, even the Kraft Center whose Board I headed,
may become too anxious to be “not too Jewish,” too eager to run up tallies of bodies
rather than measuring the warmth of souls, to be a congenial place for the mishkan. Still,
there is no impediment to a Hillel being a place from which to make these necessary
sacrifices of time and wealth, in service to those among us unable to care for themselves.

2)

Is the mishkan to be found in a Chabad House? Here too the answer is yes, but
only imperfectly. The warmth is there, no doubt. But, to take on the world only on such
narrow terms as Chabad sets for itself, is to leave behind precisely that part of the world
in which so many Jews are to be found, who most need the warmth of Chabad. These are
not the unaffiliated Jews nor the lost ones, but the Jews for whom no single Rebbe, no
matter how profound or pious, can ever take the place of each Jewish man and woman’s
personal obligation to find her or his own path to HaShem. And here too, the Chabad
House is a perfect place in which a mishkan may emerge, when a Farbrengin produces a
real commitment to service for those who are in need of help.

3)

Is the mishkan to be found outside a purely Jewish context? To my surprise, I
would have to say, there are times when that seems to be the case, and that our own Shul
is one such place. From our beginnings as a nation until today, Americans have been the
victim of the terrible social disease of racism; surely the mishkan cannot be a place where
the color of one’s skin determines one’s fate in the eyes of HaShem.

I am convinced that when Rabbi Friedman and I begin work with Reverend James
Forbes of the Riverside Church, on a project to recover the facts of slavery in New York
City, and when we already know that lynchings of freed slaves took place on
Morningside Heights during the draft riots of 1863, that we are beginning the sacred task
of telling the truth about the past, that is, of remembering Amalek in our own national
terms. Only when this past is properly acknowledged can we be a truly free people, both
as Jews, and as Americans.

4)

Is the mishkan to be found in Israel? Wait, I am not being cute, to ask this. I am
not thinking of the Bayit, but of the mishkan; that is, I am not asking about Eretz Yisroel,
but I am asking whether in Medinat Yisroel today, a mishkan dwells among our people.
And here the answer for me at last is yes, for sure, and I wish to close by telling you in
what simple facts I rest my conclusion.
The facts are these. According to Israeli government reports, 22% of Israelis live below the poverty line, and 714,000 of these are children. Fully one in three Israeli children go to bed hungry, because they are not fed at school sufficiently to compensate for the absence of proper meals at home. Meir Panim – A Shining Face – is the response to this fact that located for me the mishkan in Israel today.

Meir Panim was founded by a Haredi man, whose son died of a dread disease, and who vowed that his response to that would be to assure that as many Israeli children as he could help, he would help, totally without regard to their religion or ethnicity, so long as they lived in the land of Israel.

Last year, without government money, he brought his all-volunteer organization to the point where he was feeding about 8000 Jewish, Christian, Druze, Muslim and secular Israeli children across the country every day.

Last week Amy and I had the pleasure of meeting the founder of Meir Panim at a concert in Lincoln Center where his supporters announced that they had raised more than $4 million and were beginning to build a new facility in the Negev town of Kiryat Gat, for the production of meals for children, capable of feeding 50,000 children each day, in schools across Israel. Surely if there is a place to seek a mishkan, that facility must be quite near that place.

So there you have it: four questions, one answer. In each case, a Jewish place can be a mishkan, but only when the people in it decide to take the actions necessary to make a serious improvement in the lives of someone else, someone they are not related to, except by common humanity.

If our any of our Hillel, Chabad, Ramath Orah and non-Jewish friends were to wish to understand the meaning of the mishkan in an Israeli context, they could do no better than to visit this new Meir Panim facility, and help make lunches for delivery to hungry Israeli children.

Shabbat shalom.