

CHAPTER 2

The Meaning of the Temple¹

In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of Jewish doctrine concerning the Temple of Jerusalem, it is necessary to refer not only to the descriptions given in the Bible, but also to the oral tradition; this includes both the Talmudic and rabbinical writings, which proceed from the outward to the inward meaning of the revealed word, and the Kabbalah, the purely inward doctrine. It is obviously impossible here to consider all the scriptural texts referring to the Temple, and the numerous commentaries dealing with them; it will be sufficient for our present purpose to touch on only a few essential aspects, and to observe how these proceed from the purely spiritual doctrine and lead to an “inward vision” of the sanctuary.

The Temple in Jerusalem has the same fundamental meaning as the Tabernacle, its movable prototype. It is God’s “dwelling” (*mishkan*) or the holy place of His “indwelling” (*Shekhinah*) in the midst of Israel. “And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God. And they shall know that I am YHVH,² their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am YHVH their God” (Exod. 29:45–46). God wished to live in the “sanctuary” (*miqdash*) in order to be known; in it His Presence was to appear, speak, command: “There I will appear to thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the Ark of the Covenant, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel” (Exod. 25:22). These words were addressed to Moses, and applied not only to the Holy of Holies within the Tabernacle, but also to that of the Temple, which Solomon called an “oracle” (*d’bir*), for it was here that was revealed God’s “word” or “command” (*dibrah*) and thus also the “prophetic message” (*dibber*).

Moses erected the Tabernacle for God’s “indwelling” (*Shekhinah*) and Solomon erected the Temple for God’s “Name” (*shem*). Thus their

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² In accordance with Jewish custom, the Tetragram is not vocalized. Its pronunciation is no longer known and it has been forbidden to the Jews, for spiritual reasons, for about two thousand years.

two works were essentially one, just as God is truly present in His Name, this being precisely His “indwelling” or “habitation.”

The most sacred duty of the high priest consisted in the invocation of the Name of God. He called upon Him, and the *Shekhinah* was revealed. God Himself spoke of the indwelling of His Name in the Temple of Jerusalem: “Since the day that I brought forth My people out of the land of Egypt I chose no city among all the tribes of Israel to build an house in, that My Name might be there; neither chose I any man to be a ruler over My people Israel: But I have chosen Jerusalem, that My Name might be there; and have chosen David to be over My people Israel” (2 Chron. 6:5–6). And Solomon, who handed down these words of God, added: “YHWH said to David my father: Forasmuch as it was in thine heart to build an house for My Name, thou didst well in that it was in thine heart: notwithstanding thou shalt not build the house; but thy son which shall come forth out of thy loins, he shall build the house for My Name” (2 Chron. 6:8–9). That God Himself dwelt therein is evident from, amongst other things, the following passage which refers to the Temple: “I will perform My word with thee, which I spake unto David thy father: and I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake My people Israel” (1 Kings 6:12–13).

The Tabernacle had provided the Presence of God with no permanent habitation, for it was set up after the model of His heavenly “vehicle” (*merkabah*), in which He would lead His people through the wilderness to the fixed “center of the world,” Jerusalem. The oral tradition tells us that in the wilderness the bearers of the Ark of the Covenant were miraculously carried by it as by a vehicle. Not only did they feel no weight, but they soared with it like angels, penetrated by the light of the holy Ark and raised to prophetic vision. . . . When God’s vehicle came to rest, it was His throne; but the true earthly image of His throne, the fixed habitation of God here below, was not the Tabernacle, but the Temple. For this reason the latter alone is called God’s “house” (*beth*) or His “Lower Throne.” In themselves His vehicle and His throne are one and the same universal center; but here below it is the Temple alone which “solidifies” the latter. In it is found—according to the Talmud (*Yoma*, 54b)—the “foundation stone” (*eben shetiyah*), around which the earth was created and on which the whole world rests. Thus the Kabbalah (*Zohar*, *Terumah*, 157a) also says that the Holy Land is the center of the world, Jerusalem is the center of the Holy Land, and the Holy of Holies is the center of Jerusalem. Onto this central point all good and all nourishment descended for distribution to the entire world.

The Presence of God itself descended into His earthly dwelling, and in it appeared, spoke, listened, forgave, and blessed, so that Israel and all mankind might be raised up to Him:

Moreover concerning the stranger, which is not of Thy people Israel, but is come from a far country for the sake of Thy great Name, and Thy mighty hand, and Thine outstretched arm; if he comes and prays in this house: then hear Thou from the heavens, even from Thy dwelling place, and do according to all that the stranger calleth to Thee for; that all the peoples of the earth may know Thy Name, and fear Thee, as doth Thy people Israel, and may know that Thy Name was invoked upon this house which I have built (2 Chron. 6:32–33).

Thus did Solomon pray at the consecration of the Temple. The Chosen People were the intermediary between all peoples and the Lord of the worlds, just as the high priest was the intermediary between Him and His people. All Israel was a “kingdom of priests”: its mission consisted in “being holy” in the likeness of Holy God and thereby sanctifying the whole world; in following the Commandments; in inner purification and spiritual realization; and in the total surrendering of the heart. Of these inward operations the sacrifices and prayers of the Temple were but the outward and visible expression. Without inward conversion the offering made in the sanctuary was not accepted by the *Shekhinah*. The oral tradition describes the clear signs of God’s hearkening or anger in the Temple. From the center—the Holy of Holies—proceeded not only blessings and the light of grace, but also lightning and punishment.

Israel was “chosen” in order to espouse the indwelling (habitation) of God and thus to unite what is above with what is below, “the *Shekhinah* with the Holy One, may He be blessed.” This union of the Presence of God—and, in it, of all existence—with His infinite Majesty constituted the exalted mystery of the “center of the world.” This mystery, also called the “union of the Name”—the Name which contains both the hidden essence and the universal manifestation of God—was first performed in the Tabernacle through the mediation of Moses and Aaron, and then through the successors of the high priest in the first and second Temples. After their destruction “the *Shekhinah* accompanied Israel into exile.” God destroyed both Temples, just as He had destroyed the first two Tables of the Law by the hand of Moses, because of Israel’s sins. He punished His people very harshly, but did not forsake

them, and everywhere that they went glorifying His Name, the “scattered sparks of the *Shekhinah*,” shone forth brightly and led back those illumined to the original sun. Yet Israel would never again possess a visible center until the messianic rebuilding of the Temple foretold by the prophets.

Although the Temple represented the fixed house of God or the fixed center of the world, it was itself only a “pattern” and not yet the definitive descent of the heavenly throne, sanctuary, or Jerusalem on earth. This “will not be built by human hands, but by God Himself” as the indestructible center of the messianic kingdom. Solomon’s prototype—or rather, his anticipated image—of this divine center was as such destructible, yet not completely so, for in it an invisible spiritual “river” was crystallized and flowed forth towards all the directions of space, its vibration continuing until the final achievement of its goal. This is “the river of Yobel flowing from the supreme Eden,” the universal messianic redemption.

The spiritual stones, crystallized out of the river Yobel, were never destroyed. They are indestructible, and await their final use. Thus it is said in the Kabbalah (*Zohar, Pekudei*, 240b), that it must not for a moment be imagined that the stones serving as a foundation for Zion and Jerusalem had fallen into the hands of alien peoples. In reality they had all been hidden and preserved by the Holy One, blessed be He, so that no single one is wanting; and when He will again raise up Jerusalem, these foundation stones will return to their original places “set round with sapphires.” These are the stones of the Higher Throne, which in the Heavenly Jerusalem reflect the uncreated light streaming out from God. For the “pattern” of the earthly sanctuary is to be found in heaven, and the eternal prototype of the heavenly pattern is in God Himself. “Let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show thee, after the pattern of the Tabernacle, and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it” (Exod. 25:8–9).

This pattern or prototype of the earthly sanctuary has, as has been said—following the Kabbalah (*Zohar, Terumah*, 159a)—two overlapping aspects: one heavenly and one divine. God revealed to Moses, in the vision of the heavenly Tabernacle and its objects, the supra-formal, eternal prototypes of His earthly dwelling-place, which are based on the ten *Sefirot*, the synthetic “enumerations” of His infinite qualities. He allowed Moses to be present at the “service” of *Metatron*, the Heavenly Man and Prince of the Angels. *Metatron* is the lord of the heavenly Tabernacle, in which the sacrificial mystery is performed by the

Archangel Michael as “high priest.” But beyond that, hidden in God’s Reality itself, there is yet another “Tabernacle,” whose “high priest” is the “Divine Light.”

These three hierarchic aspects of the universal dwelling-place of God have their image here below in the tripartite division of the sanctuary: the “divine” Holy of Holies, the “heavenly” Holy, and the “earthly” outer court. Here the outer court of the Temple symbolizes the “earthly paradise.” Here below God dwells in the darkness of the Holy of Holies, for “above” also His absolute essence rests in eternal invisibility, from out of which His shining Being and its indwelling reveal themselves. The light of His indwelling radiates from the Holy of Holies to the Holy, and shines upon the seven-branched candlestick, just as above God descends from His infinity in order to sit in state above the seven heavens as Lord of the worlds, in the radiant crown of the seven all-determining, all-illuminating aspects of His countenance. Finally, the outer court, like the whole earth, serves as a permanent point of departure for the return of man to God: it is the “footstool for His feet” before which man must prostrate himself in awe, and before which the altar, on which all bodily things are offered, is set up, as is the water basin in which all souls are purified in order to appear before Him. “Woe unto the soul that does not purify itself: it shall be purified in the ‘river of fire’ (*nahar dinur*)!”

“Thus saith YHWH, the heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool: where is the house that ye build unto Me? and where is the place of My rest?” (Is. 66:1). God dwells in the immeasurable, He is omnipresent and because of this He is to be found in the smallest space, as He Himself has said, according to oral tradition: “If I will, I can dwell in a space of the extent of twenty boards to the North, twenty to the South, and eight to the West. More than that, I can descend and enclose my *Shekhinah* in one square cubit” (*Exodus Rabbah*, 34:1). His infinite Presence rests in the Holy of Holies, His immense heavenly world in the Holy, and the whole inward Reality of the physical universe in the outer court of His earthly dwelling.

Thus here, in the outer court, the earthly is sacrificed on the brazen altar, and the fleshly soul (*nefesh*) is purified in the water of the sacerdotal basin. Only thus purified may the soul enter the Holy, and, once penetrated and filled with the Spirit, it assumes the nature of the spiritual soul (*ruah*). Then is revealed to it the seven-armed candlestick, the sacred Face of God in His seven universal properties, with which the soul is clothed. Now the soul itself shines in the sevenfold light of God,

and becomes shewbread³ for all creatures. Man is completely purified, illumined, spiritualized, and sanctified and transmits the light of life and of salvation thus received to all those who earnestly seek it. One with God's entire creation, man's sanctified soul (*neshamah*) rises like incense from the golden altar of his heart and presses through the most inward curtain of his being to the Holy of Holies within it. Here, over the sacred Ark of its intimacy with God, the soul finds the redeeming cover of the reconciliation of all duality. The two cherubim are united in the Presence of the One, in whom the soul recognizes its eternal life and its own union with Him. Henceforth the soul is called the eternally "living" (*hayah*), the "one and only" (*yehidah*). The faith of Israel is realized: *Ehad*, "One."

The Temple has been destroyed, but not the path of purification, illumination, and union that lay concealed in it. Nor was His Name destroyed, "Who is near to all who call upon Him in truth." The path begins with "conversion"; it is a permanent "conversion," a turning back to God. The entire work of the Spirit has to do with conversion or return, and this is why the masters of Israel teach as follows (*Leviticus Rabbah*, 7:2): "Why is it that when someone is converted, it is accounted of him as if he had been lifted up to Jerusalem, had rebuilt the Temple, erected an altar, and carried out all the sacrifices prescribed by the Law? Because, according to the following passage (Ps. 51:17), 'the sacrifice which most pleases God is an extinguished spirit. . .'"

That which must be extinguished in the human soul is the vain, the false, the ungodly, that which is not really man's own, but which clings to him like a darksome "shell" (*qlipah*). When this is extinguished, the spirit rises once again to its own original being, which is completely filled with God. The whole man arises anew as a temple of God, a source of blessing for the world.

³ Editor's note: "Shewbread" (or "show-bread") refers to the twelve loaves of bread which, by biblical command, were replaced every Sabbath "before the Lord" on a special table beside the incense altar and the lamp-stand (the seven-branched candlestick) in the holy place. This area of the Tabernacle of ancient Israel was permitted only to priests and was separated from the Holy of Holies (which contained the Ark of the Covenant) by a heavy curtain or veil. In Hebrew, the term for the bread means, literally, "bread of the Presence."

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