BS”D

Parshas Teruma 5778

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*All of existence, all the billions of galaxies, is truly nothing compared to the true being of G-d.*

The Mystery of the Cherubim

“Let them make for Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.” (Shmos 25:8)

The sanctuary, which we will refer to here by its Hebrew name Mishkan, was a place that represented the Divine Presence. In it we served G-d with sacrifices, incense, and light. Of course, G-d was not represented with any image; “You saw no image when the L-rd, your G-d, spoke to you at Horeb (Sinai) out of the fire. [Do] not act wickedly and make yourself a sculptured image in any likeness whatever.” (Dvarim 4:15, 16)

In the Holy of Holies, the Ark of the Covenant was placed. In the Ark were the tablets of the Ten Commandments given to Moshe Rabeinu on Sinai. And on top of the Ark were two images of cherubim; angels of gold. Why did the Torah insert these images in the holiest place? Couldn’t they be misconstrued as some sort of idol or perhaps a symbol of the Divine presence? But we are forbidden from making such symbols! The golden calf was not intended originally as an idol although it degenerated into that. It was supposed to be a symbol of G-d’s presence. But the golden calf was a disastrous mistake and a great sin. We are not to symbolize His presence with any physical form.

So why does the Torah want angels in the Holy of Holies?

Rabeinu Bechaya brings in the name of the Rambam that the belief in angels is a most integral part of our faith. G-d speaks to prophets through angels. Moreover, in the philosophy of the Rambam, the angels represent bodiless intelligences that are a vital part of creation as we know it.

All of this is fine, but my original question is not answered. These angels still present a problem. How can you have images and situated in no less of a place than the Holy of Holies?

To my way of thinking, the question is best answered by the Ramban’s interpretation. But before citing that, I’d like to talk about something broader: the nature of G-d, no less.

Often we think of G-d as the Creator, which of course He is. But Kabbalistic and Chassidic sources emphasize that G-d Himself is totally beyond the Creation. Compared to Him, all of existence is as nothing.

If I may, I would like to use an image that addresses G-d’s otherness and transcendence.

There is a photo taken by the Voyager rocket hundreds of millions of miles out in space. It is of our planet earth. The earth appears as a tiny, tiny dot in the heavens. All of history, all of humanity, one tiny dot.

Now we know that our galaxy, the Milky Way, has billions of stars. But there are billions of other galaxies in the universe. The universe is vast beyond our imagination.

Now imagine *all* of that universe as a tiny dot. That is *all* of existence compared to G-d.

But actually it goes beyond that. G-d is beyond space and time. So, all of existence isn’t even the tiniest of dots. It is truly nothing compared to the true being of G-d.

G-d is what He is, utterly transcending the creation. The Kabbalists refer to G-d as He truly is, as Ein Sof, the Endless, the Infinite.

Even though there are many ways of defining the Tetragrammaton, the ineffable name of G-d, the Shem “Havayah,” we may use the name Havaya to describe this infinite transcendent aspect of G-d.

And yet the G-d who is so far removed from anything we can imagine chose to create the universe. He chose to create our planet. He chose to not only create us, but to care about us.

To describe this aspect of G-d, we use the word Elokim. “In the beginning Elokim created.” Elokim is G-d as He creates. He is G-d as He is concerned for His creation.

Now let’s look at the Ramban’s explanation of the angels—the cherubim—on the Ark cover.

The cherubim represent G-d’s throne. The prophet Yechezkel describes the angels surrounding G-d’s throne. “Above” the throne “sits” G-d.

I would suggest that the angels of the throne represent the pinnacle of creation. But G-d is beyond creation. He is not represented in any way in the Holy of Holies. He is the empty space above the cherubim. He is the transcendent Havayah, above Elokim.

The Ark represents the meeting-place of G-d, the Ein Sof, and G-d, the Creator. The invisible Ein Sof, the “I” of I am Havayah” descends, as it were, to not merely create, but to communicate with us. He speaks to Moshe from above the cherubim. Havayah becomes Elokim. He becomes Elokeinu, *our* G-d. Because He chose to create, because He chose to speak, because He chose to care.

He speaks to Moshe. But He speaks to us too. For in the Ark lie the Tablets, in the Ark lies the Torah, the words that G-d spoke: “I am Havayah, your G-d (Elokim).” These are the words in the Ark.

Once a year, the Cohen Gadol, the High Priest, enters the Holy of Holies. He burns incense to make a cloud, the cloud of mystery, the cloud that emphasizes G-d’s inscrutability. And he prays a short prayer to G-d. And the Divine message is repeated, the G-d who is infinitely beyond the highest creation—that G-d does speak to us. That G-d gives us His word, His Torah.

The giving of the Torah is repeated each time Moshe goes into the Holy of Holies to hear G-d’s word. The giving of the Torah is repeated each time the Cohen Gadol enters the Holy of Holies to worship the G-d who, from above the cherubim, above creation, speaks to us through His Torah.

And the giving of the Torah is repeated each time we study G-d’s word. He is speaking to us. Who is speaking? I, Havayah, who becomes your G-d.