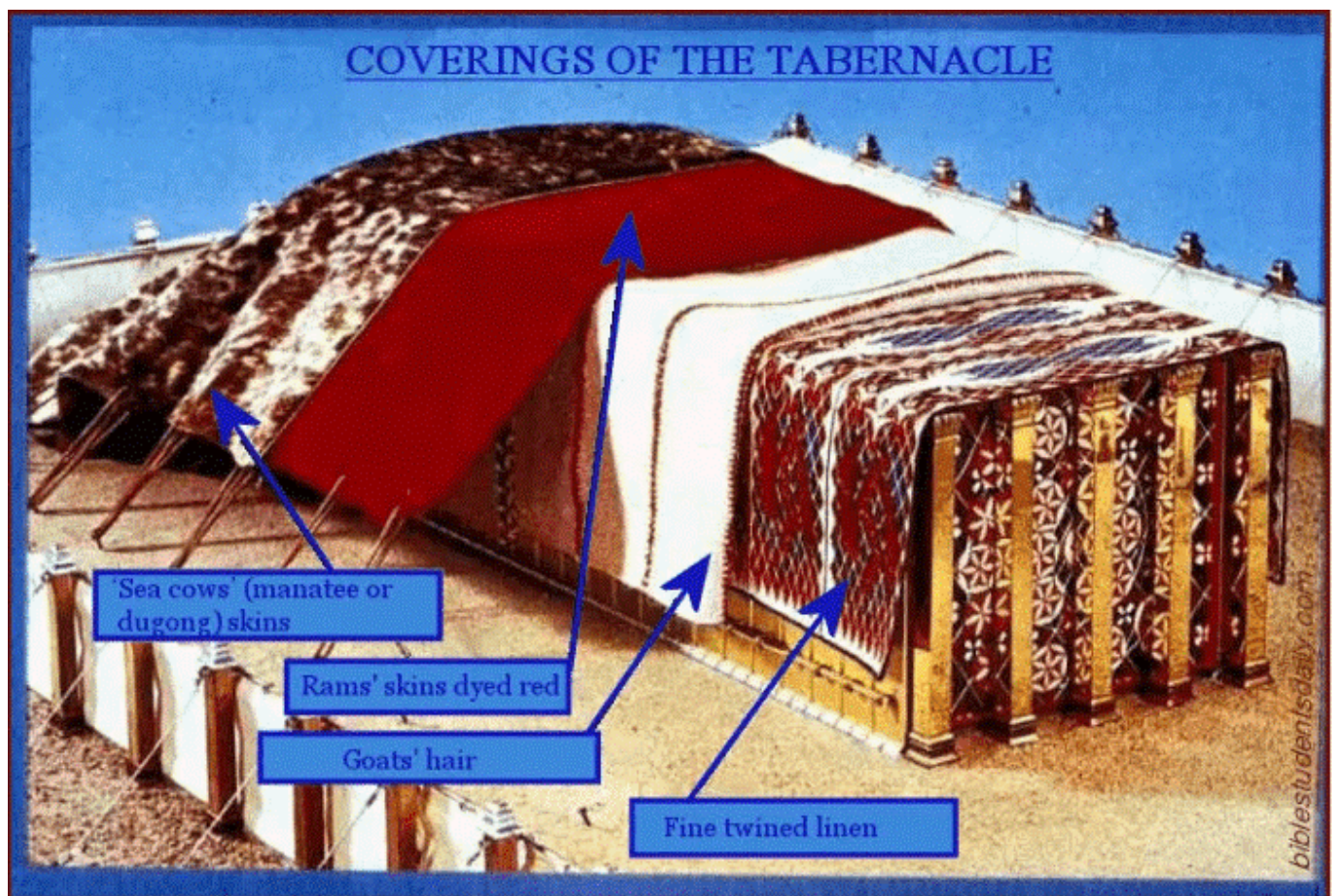


Shabbat Terumah ShaLom



by Phyllis Chesler

This parsha has always shown me how limited a wordsmith's abilities really are—I am no architect, builder, goldsmith, jeweler, wood carver, dyer, tailor, tapestry weaver, metalworker, etc.—and if God and our people had to rely on the likes of me to build a portable but material home in which God may “dwell in our midst” (25:8), then we might still be in that desert looking at God’s uncannily detailed architectural plans.

Each one of us is commanded to offer a “terumah” offering, a donation, which is to be freely offered: money, (a half-shekel), gold, silver, copper, wool, linen, spices, incense, precious stones, dyed animal skins—and all one’s skills, in order to build the Mishkan—not that daunting a task, not at all, for the Israelites. In “The Particulars of Rapture:

Reflections on Exodus,” Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg tells us that our people have been in charge of massive building projects in Egypt, of “store cities (arei miskenoth) of which the Talmud delineated two possibilities—either they endanger (mesaknot) their builders or they impoverish them (memaskenoth).” For this reason, Zornberg suggests that the Israelites might have a “visceral revulsion to the idea of an elaborate construction project.”

However, God (will) guide Moshe with detailed plans. But poor Moshe! How will he translate the model God shows him which, according to midrash, consists of four differently colored fires: Red, black, white, and green? How can mere humans work in fire? And so God patiently, carefully, lists the materials that humans can safely use and what skills are required.

Zornberg sees the Mishkan as in a “dynamic, if unconscious, relationship to the forging of the Golden Calf”—which of course, takes place two parashiot later in Ki Tisa. Thus, if this rather puzzling, out-of-place chronological order has been divinely ordained, then God has understood, even foretold, our upcoming idolatry and thus provides the cure for our “latent desire to worship a golden idol.” Zornberg writes: “The gold splendor of the Mishkan covers for (the literal meaning of kapper—‘atone’)...for the gold of the Calf.”

As I said: I am only a wordsmith, not a blacksmith, I work with words, not with gold and fire. How can I help “create a Sanctuary for God to dwell in our midst? I can study a little Torah and share it with you and do so with my ‘whole heart.’”

Good Shabbos God—and a good Shabbos to us all.