

After receiving a body of laws to govern their interaction, the people are directed to begin building the *mishkan*, the traveling Temple prototype that will accompany them on their journey. A curious component of the *mishkan*, which has given rise to a wealth of commentary, is the construction and function of the cherubim. “And you shall make two golden cherubim; you shall make them of hammered work, from the two ends of the ark cover.” (Exodus 25:18) What are these creatures doing here, and atop the Ark, of all places? Doesn’t the 2nd Commandment explicitly forbid this? But here they are, two winged creatures fashioned out of a single piece of hammered gold. Interestingly enough, cherubim are mentioned several times in our sacred writings, first appearing in Genesis 3:24, when HaShem sets them to guard the Tree of Life with their fiery swords after Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden. The word *cheruv* likely derives from the Akkadian word *kuribu*, which means to pray. In this region of the ancient world statues and pictures of these part-human, part-bird, part-beast creatures populated pagan temples, guarding their doors and serving as intermediaries between worshipers and their deities. Related words like *karov* and *korban*, which derive from the root קרב, carry the concept of approaching, drawing near. Sacrificial offerings to HaShem were called *korbanot*, for which the word *sacrifice* in most languages simply does not suffice. All of this most certainly irritated and puzzled our sages, who offered a variety of opinions on their appearance as well as their function. The Talmud (Sukkah 5b) discusses their faces: “Rabbi Abbahu said: Like that of a child [*ke-ravya*], as in Babylonia one calls a child [*ravya*].” (In Hebrew, the root רבה means to multiply.) Tractate Yoma (54a) sees them as male and female locked in embrace and representing HaShem and the Jewish people. Tractate Bava Batra 99a offers a fanciful answer to a rather lengthy rabbinic disagreement about how they were standing – facing each other or facing away: “This is not difficult, as their faces miraculously changed directions in reflection of the Jewish people’s relationship to God. ... They faced each other when the Jewish people do the will of God ... they faced the Sanctuary and not toward each other when the Jewish people do not do the will of God.” Medieval sages grappled further with these cherubim. Rashi saw them as simply a means to focus attention, while his grandson, the Rashbam, thought that their childish faces evoke the ideal of childlike closeness to HaShem, and Chizkuni taught that they symbolize HaShem’s invisible, magnificent throne. All of this is certainly interesting to contemplate, but I think there is another, more important dimension. HaShem says, “I will arrange My meetings with you there, and I will speak with you from atop the ark cover from between the two cherubim that are upon the Ark of the Testimony ...” (25:22) In music, the pauses, those “empty” spaces between the notes, are anything but empty. They are eloquent musical components that offer great insight into the emotional world the composer is evoking. This reciprocity between sound and pause is reflected in the cherubim. HaShem speaks to Moses not through their mouths, but from the empty space between them. And HaShem does not reside in the *kaporet*, the ark covering out of which the cherubim are formed, but manifests in the space atop it. This is a radical departure from ancient Mesopotamian worship with its rituals of *mīs pī* and *pīt pī*, which imbued their cultic statues with the ability to speak, hear, eat, drink, and smell. Psalm 115, which we just chanted for Rosh Chodesh, roundly disparages idols that are believed to have exactly those abilities. The construction above the Ark offers two powerful images that help us understand the unique concept of our all-encompassing, invisible, omnipresent and omnipotent God, that all the words we employ in our attempts to do so simply cannot achieve. The single piece of gold from which the *kaporet* and the cherubim are to be fashioned illustrates the concept of *echad* – the oneness evoked in the *shema Yisrael*. And the spaces from which HaShem will communicate with Moses illustrate the utter futility of portraying and worshiping HaShem through images. HaShem is *eyn sof*, the kabbalistic idea of infinity – formless and incomprehensible. HaShem communicates continually, through everything, and from everywhere, because HaShem is everything and everywhere. HaShem speaks to Moses in a way that our human intellect is not capable of completely understanding. But Moses, the mortal human being, speaks to HaShem in human fashion – in an interaction between sound and space, between finite humanity and infinite divinity, receiving and then conveying the instructions that define and guide us to this day. The single piece of precious metal from which the *kaporet* and the cherubim are fashioned is nothing more than a framework to help us comprehend the uniqueness, and communicate with the unity, the *eyn sof* that we worship. The entire universe and all it holds is an inseparable part of the oneness of HaShem. We humans, the creatures who have the gift of speech, can try as we might to express in words our awe, our gratitude, our worries, and our pleas, but in the end, we realize that all the words that even the most talented wordsmiths can muster are not enough. Only the wordless juxtaposition of sound and silence, image and space can bridge the chasm between us and HaShem. *Eyn od* – that’s all there is, and that is enough.

Shabbat shalom!