

TIMELESS TORAH

TERUMAH : SACRED SPACE IN A MATERIAL WORLD

Abstracts & Aspirations

There is a constant tension between the material limitations of the physical world within which we live and the aspirational ideals of the soul longing for spiritual connection. Parashat Terumah begins the five-parashah long description of the building of the Mishkan and its accessories, the structure that would assume the central place of Jewish worship throughout their sojourn in the Wilderness as well as - in an adapted form - in Eretz Yisrael. The purpose of the Mishkan, as described in the Torah, was to create a space within which Hashem could 'dwell amongst the Jewish people' (25:8). In other words, it was a place designed to help resolve this ongoing tension. It is in this sense that the Ibn Ezra (d.1164) highlights the fact that from now on, Divine instruction would emanate from the Mishkan in the centre of the Jewish encampment, rather than the summit of Har Sinai. The sanctity of Jewish life cannot find continuous inspiration from a distant mountaintop. With the building of the Mishkan, the people were to create a holy space among them for Hashem's Presence to reside.

The Ramban (d.1270), taking this idea further, explains that the Jewish people, after the events at Har Sinai, had now attained a significant level of sanctity. They had heard the Ten Commandments and entered a covenant that declared them to be a 'precious nation' to Hashem. This could not be left abstract; a physical space had to be built to serve as a continuous reminder of Hashem's Presence amongst them. But this space is not simply a 'temple' and its accessories are not fetishes. As Rav Soloveitchik points out, the Mishkan contains all the basic elements of a home - light, food, shelter and so on - because it represents the possibility of a person's own living space becoming a sanctuary for Hashem.

Timeless Temple

For humans to create a physical place within which Hashem might reside would seem impossibly unattainable. Indeed, the Midrash relates that when Moshe was first instructed about the Mishkan, 'he threw himself back in surprise' (Pesikta d'Rav Kehana 2), exclaiming that even an edifice as big as the Heavens and the Earth would not be enough to contain the majesty of Hashem. Hashem replied to Moshe that if the Jewish people would undertake simply to build 'twenty beams in the north and twenty in the south', He would 'contract' his Presence and reside within it.

Esoteric as this Midrash might be, the Maharal of Prague (d.1609) encapsulates it in a short passage. Although the verse refers to the Mishkan as a '*mikdash*', Rashi explains this to mean '*beit kedushah* - a house of holiness'. The Maharal explains that to create a *mikdash* insinuates that the people would be creating the very *kedushah*, holiness, that permeates the building. But this cannot be the case. Their instructions were rather to create a 'house that could **become** holy'. As much as the Mishkan was to be a sanctuary for Hashem's Presence, the role of the people was only to create the space that would allow for holiness to reside. Perhaps this is why the description of the Mishkan is repeated three times in the Torah: in the instructions to Moshe, in the narrative of how it was carried out and finally when all the various pieces were put together. The emphasis is always on the part of the Mishkan project that is within human capacity; the Divine sanctity remains Divine.

But in building a sanctuary for Hashem, our task does not end with physical artifacts. In discussing why the Mishkan is referred to as a *mikdash*, the Ohr HaChaim (d.1743), writes that the word *mikdash* has a connotation of timelessness. Basing himself on the writings of the Rambam, he contends that the mitzvah



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to build the Mishkan exists throughout the generations. In theory, he adds, if not for the prohibition to offer sacrifices outside of Mount Moriah, there would be an obligation to create a sanctuary for Hashem even in exile.

In light of the above, however, even if an actual *mikdash* cannot be built in exile, there is certainly a conceptual responsibility to create sacred spaces. Our task is to look at the environments we occupy, the shuls and other communal institutions we build, even our very lives, and ask ourselves if we are living up to this ideal. The central lesson of the construction of the Mishkan is to order the way we live in a manner that creates room for the Divine to enter.

Table of Royalty

Examining a specific example of one of the vessels of the Mishkan will allow us to understand how this can be achieved. Of the principal artifacts in the Mishkan, we can easily understand the function of the Altar and the Menorah as well as the centrality and symbolism of the Ark. The concept of the Shulchan, however, the Table for the Showbread, seems more puzzling. Rabbeinu Bechaye (d.1340) cites a Midrash that suggests that the word *shitim*, the acacia wood from which the Shulchan was formed, is an acronym for 'peace (*shalom*), goodness (*tovah*), salvation (*yeshuah*) and forgiveness (*mechilah*)'. Citing another source, Rabbeinu Bechaye shows how the Shulchan is sometimes called an altar, underscoring the significance the Shulchan has in our Divine service. Why is a showcase of loaves of bread so critical to the Mishkan?

Rabbeinu Bechaye explains that the word Shulchan, although literally meaning 'table', actually stems from the word '*sholeach*, to send'. The Shulchan with its bread was the

channel through which all bounty in this world was Divinely sent.

Moreover, the Shulchan was adorned with a golden crown, representing royalty. Just as a king must ensure that his subjects are properly sustained, so too the Shulchan provided sustenance to the world. Rabbeinu Bechaye continues, citing the words of the Sages, that even nowadays, this source of blessing and indeed, the atonement that the Shulchan brought, can be found. Our ordinary dining room tables, he says, can be transformed to function as sublime vehicles of Hashem's bounty if we use them in the correct way. By using our table to appreciate the good that Hashem has sent us and to share our portion with others less fortunate than ourselves, we allow our mundane pieces of furniture to become the sacred space upon which Hashem will rest His Presence.

He concludes with a remarkable anecdote which serves to illustrate this. In medieval Europe, there were pious individuals who would fashion an *aron* (coffin) for burial using the wood of their tables with which they had practised so much kindness towards others. The message for the next generation could not have been clearer. Ultimately, it is the sacred space we create in this world that escorts us into the World to Come.

Next week - TETZAVAH : BUILDING GREATNESS
THROUGH CONSISTENT COMMITMENT