

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Shmini

The Book of Exodus culminates with G-d's command to Construct the Mishkan, or Temple, according to His design. More than four Parshiot, or sections of the Torah, are spent on the details of this house of G-d. The book of Leviticus details the usage of the Temple and is thus the natural successor to its antecedent. In order to best understand many of the commandments in Leviticus we must first attain a level of understanding of the context in which we find them. Namely, we must understand the purpose of the Mishkan.

The concept of G-d desiring a building to be His home in a human, physical world is troubling. What do we mean when we say that G-d focuses His presence in a specific building? And how did this Presence affect the Jewish people?

Rabbi Yehudah haLevi [circa 1140], in explaining the purposes of the Temple and its service states: "The rectifying benefit of the sacrificial order is that it allows the [Heavenly] King to reside amidst the nation. By 'reside' we mean a manifestation of God's greatness, not a spatial location" [Sefer haKuzari, II:25]. Clearly, the House of G-d is not a physical home. But rather it is a place of focus for G-d to "manifest His greatness" amongst the people. The meaning of this idea is still obscure. What exactly is the connection between the Temple and the people? And what is the connection between G-d's greatness and the people's service? How does one impact the other?

For more specific detail regarding the purpose of the Temple we turn to Sefer haChinuch [anonymous, 13th century Spain] who explains:

"... Building a Temple for the Eternal Lord, there to offer up our prayers and our sacrifices to Him, would be entirely in order to prepare our hearts for His worship (be He exalted)—not because He needs to dwell in a house of human beings and come under the shelter of their roof... for 'heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him,' as by His spirit they endure. All the more certainly would His glory have no need of a house built by human beings... This is surely a known and clear matter that it was all meant for making our physical selves worthy. For the physical self becomes qualified through its actions. As good actions are multiplied and as they are continued with great perseverance, the thoughts of the heart become purified, cleansed and refined. Now, the Eternal L-rd desires good for human beings... Therefore He commanded us to establish a site that should be pure and clean to the ultimate degree of cleanness, there to purify the thoughts of people and to rectify and perfect their heart toward Him.

He chose that site and prepared it for the good of human beings...Then by the worthiness of deed and the purification of thought that we would attain there, our intelligence would ascend to [find] adherence with the supernal [Divine] intelligence.



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continued ...

Thus, with this approach, we can explain the dwelling of the *shechinah*, the Divine Presence, at that site... So did He wish, in His great kindness, to set a place for them in the land [of Israel] that should be prepared for the good of people and for their merit—all this out of His loving-kindness for His humans.

[Commandment 95]

In this week's parsha we read of a commandment for the kohanim, or the priests, describing a sort of dress code, that demands a certain presentation beyond the actual priestly uniform.

“And Moses said to Aaron and to Elazar and to Ithamar, his sons, ‘Do not leave your heads unshorn, and do not rend your garments...’”

[Leviticus 10:6]

Again we turn to Sefer haChinuch who explains the idea of shorn versus unshorn heads as well as the fundamental difference between whole and torn clothing:

At the root of the precept lies the purpose of increasing the Temple's distinction. As we noted above, we were commanded to ennoble it with all our power, for the reason we have stated. It is therefore right for us that we should not enter there with overgrown hair, in the way of mourners. It is akin to what is stated in the Scroll of Esther: “for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth” (Esther 4:2). In other words, it is only proper to come to the House of the Eternal L-rd in a state of happiness, joy and delight, and not in a state of mourning and grief. All this supports the fundamental concept that everything to do with the Temple and its tasks was intended to confirm and impress in the heart of those who do them a state of worth and nobility, and to move far from their heart and thoughts every ugliness and sinfulness. Therefore, as this was the purpose of the Temple, it would be proper for us to come there in a mood of respect and reverent fear, dignity and joy, while fastening our thoughts on the importance of the place. Then its grandeur, splendor and majesty will soften our hearts there [making them receptive] and we will be worthy to receive good reward.

[Commandment 149]

In today's world, we no longer have a Mishkan whose focus is helping people purify their thoughts and rectify and perfect their hearts toward G-d. Nevertheless, through the study of Torah and attaching ourselves to the Jewish community, we too can command respect, generate dignity and joy, and allow the grandeur, splendor and majesty of G-d, fill our hearts so that we may share in the receiving of great reward.

Shabbat Shalom!

