

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Terumah

G-d commanded the Jewish people to build a portable Mishkan (Tabernacle) during their travels in the desert, and eventually when the Jews settled in Israel, Solomon built a stationary Temple in Jerusalem. By studying the portions in the Torah and Prophets which discuss the construction of the Tabernacle and the Temple, we learn a great deal about the ideal attitudes to places of prayer. This is very relevant to us, because since the destruction of the second Temple 2000 years ago, our communal synagogues serve as miniature Temples.

Let us look at Tanach to discover the proper intent we should have in building a place of prayer. In the beginning of our parsha (Exodus 25:8), G-d says, "They shall make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them." Rashi says that when G-d says to make it "for me," he means that it should be built for my name. Thus, the verse instructs us that the motivation to build a Temple should not be self-serving, but rather should grow out of a pure desire to serve Hashem.

We see this idea later in history, when King Solomon prepares for the construction of the Temple and sends a message to a gentile king Chiram who offered to help with the construction project. Solomon tells Chiram that his father David could not build the Temple, although he expressed a strong interest to do so, "because of the war that surrounded him" (Kings 5:17). He then says to him, "I have decided to build a house for the name of Hashem, my God, as Hashem spoke to my father David...Your son will build a house for my name."

What does Solomon mean when he says David may not build the Temple because wars surround him? R' Chaim Shmulevitz (20th century) suggests that since David's prayers in the Temple would help him win wars, his motivation in building the Temple would not be purely for the name of Hashem. There would be a tinge of self-interest in building the Temple, for the Temple could serve as an indirect tool to help Israel beat its enemies. Solomon, who G-d calls a man of peace and who did not fight wars, would build the Temple purely to glorify the name of G-d. Therefore, Solomon stresses that because he is not busy fighting wars, he will build the Temple strictly "for the name of Hashem."

Although G-d wanted the mishkan of Moshe and the Temple of Solomon to be built strictly for his name and not to satisfy any personal interest, services performed in the Temple would indirectly benefit them in a number of ways. One benefit came through the sacrifices, which enabled the Jewish people to receive atonement from their sins. When Balaam blesses the Jewish people "How goodly are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places Israel" (Number 24:5), Rashi there explains the "tents" refer to the Temple services, where the Jewish people brought sacrifices to atone for their sins.

Rashi adds that the "dwelling places" refer to G-d destroying the two Temples to atone for the sins of the Jewish people. The Hebrew word for dwelling places ("mishkenotecha") can also be translated as collateral, meaning that by destroying the Temples, G-d took them metaphorically as collateral to pay for the sins of the Jewish people. Otherwise, he might have punished them with physical annihilation. Similarly, when the Torah repeats the word "mishkan" in reference to the Tabernacle of the desert (Exodus 38:21), the midrash says it alludes to the two Temples taken as collateral for the sins of the Jewish people.



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The Jews also benefited from the Temple in the sense that it provided them a house of prayer to connect to G-d. In an alternative interpretation of “How goodly are your tents, Jacob,” the Talmud (Sanhedrin 105b) says it refers to the synagogues and houses of study, which will never cease from the Jewish people. According to this explanation, Balaam refers not to the Temples of the past but rather to the present, miniature temples in our communities. He refers not to achieving atonement through animal sacrifices but rather to connecting to G-d through prayer.

If we study David’s failed attempt to build the temple from yet another angle, we can gain further insight into the significance of a house of prayer, and this will help us form a positive attitude to our synagogue experience. Chronicles I (22:8) records that G-d told David, “You shall not build a Temple for my name’s sake, because you have shed much blood on the ground before me.” Nachmonides (Numbers 16:21) explains this to mean that since David was a man of justice who fought battles and spilled blood, he could not build a “house of mercy.”

Nachmonides says the Jewish people had to wait for Shlomo, the man of peace who did not fight wars, to build this house. At its core, the Temple serves as a place for man to call upon G-d’s attribute of mercy, beseech G-d to free him from his sorrow, and help him realize his dreams. When one prays in the Temple, he relates not to G-d’s attribute of justice but rather to his attributes of kindness and compassion. Nachmonides calls the Temple a “house of mercy,” for it is there that man asks G-d to have mercy on him. Similarly, the Talmud (Berachot 26a) identifies prayer as “a plea for divine mercy.”

If we understand prayer in the synagogue as an opportunity to ask G-d for compassion, prayer becomes a very natural exercise and we can embrace it lovingly instead of approaching it with fear. The verses we say upon entering the synagogue to pray in the very beginning of the day help us create this proper mentality. After saying the verse “How goodly are your tents,” which refers to our synagogues, we quote other verses from Psalms that paradoxically talk about entering G-d’s house with both a recognition of G-d’s boundless kindness and a sense of awe.

We say, “Through your abundant kindness I will enter your house, I will bow to your holy Sanctuary in awe of you.” While it is true that in the synagogue we stand in awe of G-d, we simultaneously appreciate his great kindness in giving us the special opportunity to connect to him and ask for mercy. The introductory verses of our prayers reinforce what we learn from King David and King Solomon: that prayer is an opportunity to relate to our merciful father.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Yosef Saltzman

3921 Fabian Way Suite A-017
(650) 493-5764



Palo Alto, CA 94303
www.jsn.info