

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Terumah

This week's parsha deals exclusively with the construction of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and its furniture. This portable sanctuary was used by the Jews for over four and a half centuries until King Solomon built the First Temple in 832 BCE. The Mishkan, and the Divine Service that was done there, play a central role in the rest of the Torah. Unfortunately, it is at this point that many people drop out of parsha study. The story line of the Torah has grinded to a halt and suddenly the Torah appears to be quite irrelevant. The mystery of the Mishkan, and its meaning for us nowadays when we lack it, has evaded many. The serious student of the Torah is now called upon to search beneath the surface of the text and bring home the powerful messages that await discovery.

The wording of the Torah in the beginning of the parsha seems a bit awkward. Literally, it reads: "They shall make Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell among them. Just like all the plans for the Mishkan and all its furnishings that I am showing you. And so shall you do" (Shemot 25:8-9). There is more here than meets the eye. A key to the deeper meaning of this text was revealed by the sages when they taught, "'so shall you do' - forever" (*Sanhedrin* 16b). Apparently, the meaning of these verses is not limited to the construction of the Mishkan. There is another layer of meaning that addresses us directly.

Rabbi Chaim Volozhner (1749-1821) elaborates in no uncertain terms. "The way I understand it, G-d is saying the following, 'Let no one make the mistake of thinking that My intent in the construction of the Mishkan is about the physical building itself. Not at all. Rather, you should know that the *sole objective* of the Mishkan and its furniture is to indicate to you to learn from it and model yourselves after it. Your own behavior should be as wonderful as the Mishkan and its furniture, completely holy and worthy of the Presence of G-d.' This is the meaning of the verse, 'They shall make me a sanctuary and I will dwell among *them*, just like all the plans for the Mishkan,' i.e., My point here with the Mishkan is that you should make yourselves like it. ...It follows that when the Jews ruined their inner sanctuaries, there was no longer any purpose for the external building of the Holy Temple. That is why the Temple was destroyed" (*Nefesh HaChaim* 1:4). There is no point of having a Mishkan or Temple if nobody gets the message.

The first item that our parsha describes is the centerpiece of the Tabernacle, the Holy Ark. G-d instructs us to keep the two Tablets of the Covenant inside the ark and place the ark in the Holy of Holies. The surprising thing is what goes on the lid. On the cover of the ark are two cherubim facing each other, carved from one solid block of gold. The sages explain that the cherubim symbolize the relationship between G-d and the Jews. This is the place where G-d is closest to us. "I will meet with you there, speaking to you from above the ark-cover..." (Shemot 25:22).



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The Talmud reports the following, “On the Holidays they [the Kohanim] would roll back the curtain and show everyone how the Cherubim were hugging one another. They [the Kohanim] would say to the Jews, ‘See how beloved you are before G-d’” (*Yoma* 54a). On the other hand, the Zohar says that when the Jews sinned the cherubim turned away from each other (*Terumah* 43:1). It seems that the cherubim were a barometer of sorts that actually responded to and mirrored the fluctuating relationship between G-d and the Jews. What makes this instrument tick? On what does the relationship between G-d and the Jews rest? It rests on the Torah, on the Tablets of the Covenant.

The lesson for us is clear. The first stage of construction of our inner sanctuary is to let the Torah enter the deepest places within us, our own Holy of Holies. From there the Torah acts as the driving force behind our personal growth and development. It is the Torah that deepens our relationship with G-d to the point that we become a home for G-d’s Presence. This is the message of the Holy Ark.

The Talmud states that the Temple was destroyed because the Jews stopped making the blessing on the Torah (*Nedarim* 81a). This is a bit difficult to comprehend. For a relatively minor infraction like that the Temple was lost? Rabbi Yoel Sirkes (1561-1640) in his commentary on the *Tur* (O.C. 47) explains what the Talmud is trying to say. In giving us the Torah, it was G-d’s intent that through the study of Torah and the performance of mitzvot we would form a relationship with Him. If we approach Torah with that goal in mind, then we could elevate ourselves to the point of becoming a dwelling place for G-d’s Presence. Unfortunately, Jews began to study Torah for their own pleasure, just to learn civil law or to show off their scholarship, and not for the higher purpose of connecting to G-d and bringing the *Shechina* down to earth. Eventually, they even stopped saying the blessing on the Torah. This attitude caused G-d’s Presence to depart and the vacated Temple to be destroyed.

The mitzvah to build a Mishkan is not at all defunct; it is a mitzvah for each of us today. If we place a Torah in our Ark and construct a Holy Temple within, G-d will enter. May our efforts merit the rebuilding of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem speedily in our days.

Shabbat Shalom!

