

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Terumah

In this week's parsha, G-d commands us to build Him a home, a Mishkan (Tabernacle). This mitzvah certainly raises eyebrows. Why on earth does G-d need a home? Are the desert nights getting too cold? The whole idea of a house for G-d is quite ridiculous. As the Midrash says, "When G-d said, 'Build a sanctuary for Me,' Moshe countered, 'But the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain You! (I Kings 8:27)' (Bamidbar Rabba 12:3).

Rabbi Chaim Volozhner (1749-1821) explains: "G-d is saying the following: 'Let no one make the mistake of thinking that My intent in the construction of the sanctuary 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 Divine Presence.' This is the meaning of the verse, 'They shall make me a sanctuary and I will dwell among *them...*' (*Nefesh HaChaim* 1:4).

The Mishkan is merely a model. When a Jew experienced the power of the *Shechina's* presence in the Mishkan, he said to himself, "If G-d can enter this building, He must certainly be able to enter me." G-d is prepared to rest His divine presence within us, but we must first develop ourselves into living sanctuaries. If we build it, He will come.

It would serve us well to take a closer look at how the Mishkan is constructed. After all, our own personal construction should be based upon it. If the Mishkan is to be our model for our personal sanctuaries, let's study the blueprints.

Unfortunately, there are none. The Torah provides no diagrams, no illustrations, not even a sketch. The entire Mishkan is described only in words. (And many of them, I might add.) An impressive literary feat, no doubt, but doesn't G-d know that a picture is worth a thousand words? Wouldn't it have been far more efficient to provide us with a drawing instead of so many verses?

Everybody knows there are 613 mitzvot in the Torah. Sounds like a lot, but the Vilna Gaon (Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, 1720-1797) argues that this popular Talmudic tradition is actually an understatement. Are we to believe that from parshat Bereishit all the way to parshat Bo there are no more than three mitzvot? Some parshiot have none at all. Have they nothing to say?



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The Vilna Gaon teaches that in fact, every single word of the Torah is its own mitzvah. 613 may be the number of primary mitzvot, but there are far, far more mitzvot out there. On some level, all things in life are mitzvot when they are done right. A person with his eyes in his head can fulfill a mitzvah every moment of the day, in everything he does. A careful reading of the Torah teaches us how.

When it comes time to put the Mishkan together, the Torah stresses how each component was put in place “as G-d commanded Moshe.” In fact, the Torah repeats that description every step of the way (Shemot 40:17-32):

“It was in the first month of the second year on the first of the month that the Mishkan was erected. Moshe erected the Mishkan... as G-d had commanded Moshe.

“He brought the Ark into the Mishkan... as G-d had commanded Moshe.

“He put the Table in the Tent of Meeting... as G-d had commanded Moshe.

“He placed the Menorah in the Tent of Meeting... as G-d had commanded Moshe

“He placed the Gold Alter in the Tent of Meeting... as G-d had commanded Moshe...”

And so on. The Torah is not just being verbose; it’s making an important point. Every act in the construction of the Mishkan was its own mitzvah. G-d didn’t just give them a blueprint and say, “Make this.” That would be only one mitzvah. Instead, G-d spelled out every stage of construction in our parsha as an independent command, making each act an independent fulfillment of G-d’s will. Only with a constant stream of mitzvot can G-d’s sanctuary be built.

Our personal sanctuaries are no different. If we want G-d’s presence to be comfortable within us, then our every act must find favor before G-d. This is the mission of the Jew: to sanctify the mundane, to elevate all of life into mitzvah, and ultimately to become a breathing Mishkan. Yes, G-d does indeed want a house - a house of flesh and blood.

Shabbat Shalom!

JSN TEAM!

