

Parashat Terumah, 5774, 2014:

Understanding the Purpose of the Beit Hamikdash (Holy Temple)

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

And they shall make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst. (*Sefer Shemot* 25:8)

This verse is arguably the most famous one in our *parasha*. Rashi (1040-1105) emphasizes that the Mikdash (sanctuary) must be solely dedicated to Hashem: “And they shall make in My name (*li*) a house of sanctity.” (This and all Rashi and Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) In other words, the purpose of the Mikdash, and by extension, all houses of Jewish worship and study, is to create a consecrated environment wherein finite man can encounter infinite Hashem.

The *Mechilta d’Rabbi Yishmael*, the halachic Midrash to *Sefer Shemot*, notes that it is impossible to construct a dwelling place per se for Hashem and, therefore, questions the very concept of attempting to do so:

“And they shall make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst.” Why was this even stated? After all, was it not already said “Behold I fill the heavens and the earth?” [And, therefore, how can any dwelling contain Me?] (*Sefer Yirmiyahu* 23:24) If that is the case, what is communicated by the Torah’s phrase, “And they shall make Me a sanctuary?” This is taught in order to teach us that the construction of the sanctuary, in and of itself, is its own reward (*keday l’kabale sechar al he’asiah*).

In sum, the Midrash teaches us that the idea of a “building a house for Hashem” is a definitional absurdity. This notion was already underscored when Isaiah famously

declared: “So says the L-rd, ‘The heavens are My throne, and the earth is My footstool; which is the house that you will build for Me, and which is the place of My rest?’” (*Sefer Yeshiyahu* 66:1) As such, the value of constructing such an edifice obtains exclusively as a result of fulfilling Hashem’s command. Given this analysis of the *Mechilta*, one may now ask: “What, then, is the essential purpose of the *Beit Hamikdash* (the Holy Temple)?” It is to this question we now turn.

The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) in *Sefer HaMitzvot*, positive commandment 20, quotes “the *Sifri*,” the halachic Midrash to *Sefer Devarim*, wherein it states that the construction of the *Beit Hamikdash* is one of the three *mitzvot* the Jewish people are obligated to perform upon their entrance into Israel:

“The Jewish people were commanded three *mitzvot* upon entering Israel: appointing for themselves a king, building themselves a Sanctuary and wiping out the descendants of Amalek.” This wording [“three *mitzvot*”] shows clearly that building the Sanctuary is counted as a distinct *mitzvah*. (Translation, Berel Bell)

In Maimonides’ view, the purpose of the building of the *Beit Hamikdash* is to provide the Jewish people with a place to practice all aspects of the *Avodah*, the Temple Service:

The 20th *mitzvah* that we are commanded is to build a House of *Avodah*. In it we offer sacrifices, burn the eternal flame, offer our prayers, and congregate for the festivals each year, as will be explained. The source of this *mitzvah* is G-d’s statement (exalted be He), “Make a Sanctuary for Me.” (Ibid.)

Thus, for the Rambam, the Holy Temple’s rationale is exclusively ritualistic in nature, i.e. to provide a designated place wherein the *Avodah* may properly take place. As is usually the case, the anonymous author of the *Sefer HaChinuch* also championed the Rambam’s explanation of our *mitzvah*.

The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), in his introduction to our *parasha*, takes a different approach than the Rambam in his explanation of “And they shall make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst.” He notes that we were transformed into the *Am Hanivchar* (the Chosen People) when Hashem spoke to us “face to face” at *Har Sinai* (Mount Sinai). Now, we were a holy nation singularly dedicated to Hashem’s service. As such, “it was fitting and proper that there should be a sanctuary among them wherein Hashem’s divine presence could dwell.” Therefore, according to Nachmanides’ chronology, the first post-Sinai commandment was the construction of the *Mishkan*, the portable *Beit Hamikdash*. Its objective was to engender the continuation of the dialogical encounter between Hashem and Moshe that took place at Mount Sinai. Therefore, the Ramban explicitly states, “the secret understanding (*sod*) of the *Mishkan* was to enable the Glory [of G-d] that had dwelt upon Mount Sinai to dwell therein in a hidden manner.” Moreover, “ within the *Mishkan*, that would forever be with the Jewish people, would be found the Glory [of G-d] that had appeared to them on *Har Sinai*.” Thus, for Nachmanides, we are met with the following deceptively simple formula: *Mishkan* = Mount Sinai = Continuous Presence of Hashem.

Whether one elects to follow the Rambam or the Ramban, it is clear that the Holy One blessed be He commanded us to construct a uniquely holy place wherein we could communicate with Him in a depth-level spiritually-infused fashion. In addition, it appears that He wanted His Voice to echo forth eternally from this sacred place, so that it would serve as a constant reminder that, “The L-rd is near to all who call Him, to all who call Him with sincerity.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 145:18). May each us be *zocheh* (merit) to be near to Him now, and in the soon-to-be-rebuilt *Beit Hamikdash*. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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