

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Re'eh)

Recently at a wedding in LA, the family of the groom decided to daven mincha (pray the afternoon prayer) and someone immediately asked: 'Which way is East?' I was struck by the fact that in Israel no-one asks, 'Which way is East?'; it's always 'Which way is Jerusalem?' (I recall the first time in Lebanon we prayed facing south; a strange feeling for someone used to praying east, having grown up in NY...)

And of course, it is always powerful to realize that any Jew, praying anywhere in the world faces Israel. And every Jew in Israel always faces Jerusalem, and every Jew in Jerusalem faces the Old City, and every Jew in the Old City prays facing the Temple Mount and specifically the place where the Temple once stood. Why is the Temple so important that even today we still yearn for its rebuilding and pray facing its location?

It is interesting to note that the forerunner of the Temple or **Beit HaMikdash**, was actually the Tabernacle, also known as the **Mishkan**. Indeed, it was the *Mishkan* which accompanied the Jews in the desert for nearly forty years after they left Mount Sinai, and it continued to be the center of Jewish spiritual life in Israel hundreds of years after the Jews entered the land of Israel, at Shiloh.

Indeed, for nearly four hundred years, through the reign of Joshua, throughout the centuries of rule of the Judges and until after the death of King David, there was no Temple, only a *Mishkan*.

And in the Torah, throughout the books of *Shemot* (Exodus), *Vayikra* (Leviticus) and *Bamidbar* (Numbers), the *Mishkan* is mentioned hundreds of times and is one of the focal points of discussion regarding its construction as well as the details of the service and sacrifices meant to be experienced there.

All of which is what makes it so interesting to note that, as noted by Rav Menachem Leibtag, in the book of *Devarim* (Deuteronomy), the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) is not mentioned even once! Hundreds of times the *Mishkan* appears in the books of *Shemot*, *Vayikra* and *Bamidbar*, but appears nowhere in *Devarim*.

On the other hand, the Torah describes in *Devarim* again and again the idea of a place chosen by G-d, and although not directly named as the *Beit HaMikdash*, the phrase:

"HaMakom asher Yivchar Hashem Elokecha..."
literally: 'The place the Lord your G-d has chosen...'

occurs multiple times in our book of *Devarim*, and no less than sixteen times in this week's portion of *Re'eh*.

So why is the *Mishkan* no longer mentioned, especially as it will remain the spiritual center of the Jewish people for hundreds of years? And why is the Torah so focused on a place chosen by G-d (which will not actually be 'chosen' until the end of the reign of King David (see *Chronicles (Divrei Hayamim)* II: 3:1)

There is an obvious difference between the *Mishkan* and the *Beit HaMikdash*: the *Mishkan* was always a temporary structure, whereas the *Beit HaMikdash* (the Temple) was meant to be permanent.

In fact, one might suggest the *Mishkan* ideally was never meant to be at all: if the Jews had not transgressed with the Golden Calf they most probably would have left Sinai directly for Israel where they were most certainly meant to eventually build a permanent center of worship: the *Beit HaMikdash*.

Indeed Rashi (and many other commentaries) believed the command to build a *Mishkan* was only the result of the Sin of the Golden Calf; once it became clear the Jews were not headed directly into Israel but would rather be spending longer than anticipated in the desert. They needed a spiritual anchor, a place where they could connect with G-d possibly as a response to what they felt was missing which caused the Golden Calf in the first place. So Hashem (G-d) enjoins them to build a *Mishkan* which will accompany them on their journeys until such time as they are ready to build a permanent in Jerusalem.

And why did the ideal include such a permanent structure in Israel? Because nothing lasts forever, and we all need a way to recharge our batteries and reconnect. And so, three times a year every Jew was meant to take a break from the incessant grind of life and journey to a place where the presence of Hashem could be more intensely experienced, a place where the entire Jewish people came together, where we re-experienced a yearning for a closer connection with Hashem.

Interestingly, in the book of Chronicles (*Divrei Hayamim*) II: 3:1) when David finally decides to build a permanent *Beit HaMikdash* (and G-d agrees that the people are ready) the mountain designated by G-d is called Mount Moriah: the exact place of the binding of Isaac.

Rav Soleveitchik suggests that there are two mountains in Judaism, Mount Sinai and Mount Moriah. Mount Sinai was where G-d gave to us; it was at Sinai that we received the ultimate gift from G-d, the Torah. Mount Moriah however is where we were willing to give everything up for G-d; it was in that place Avraham was willing to offer up his son whom he loved more than anything else in the world...

The Temple was to be built in the place that represented our willingness to give; to be partners with G-d in making a better world, and most of all, our willingness to change.

So, it becomes clear why the book of Devarim and especially our portion of Re'eh sees no mention of the *Mikdash*. This portion is all about the Jewish people readying themselves to enter the land of Israel.

It is where Moshe enjoins the Jewish people, as part of creating a society that will be a role model for the world to remove all idolatrous pagan practice from the land (hard to build an ethical society next-door to people that commit murder, adultery, robbery or are without an ethical system of courts and justice (i.e. the seven Noachide laws...)). And part of this is the need for a spiritual center that helps to foster Jewish unity, as well as a National center which will house the Sanhedrin (the High Court).

Thus, the book of Devarim makes clear that the goal is a society and land with Hashem and spirituality at its center, on a permanent basis. Thus, obviously the *Mishkan* is not the focus here, the *Beit HaMikdash* is.

We are living in incredible times as physically, the Jewish people are at long last, after two thousand years of wandering, returning home. The largest Jewish community in the world is now in Israel, and very soon the majority of the Jews in the world will be in Israel. And we are witnessing a world-wide debate on whether Jerusalem is really the capital, the center of the Jewish State and the Jewish people. This is not an accident; at stake here is the simple question of whether at our core, we are a people chosen by G-d whose prayers face a place and a mission chosen by G-d.

And as a part of this question it behooves us as well, on a personal and individual level to ask ourselves what lies at the center of our lives; in what direction is our focus? Are we directing ourselves towards a spiritual goal, or is the center of our lives simply physical? And do we have a place or a space we can retreat to and regular experiences which will allow us to change, to grow to recharge and to experience Hashem and deeper meaning in our lives.

And perhaps the difference between a temporary *Mishkan* vs. a permanent *Mikdash* alludes to whether we find a way to make such moments last. This is the question at the heart of this week's portion of Re'eh: to see, and really to choose, what path our lives will take. Something to think about.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem.

Binny Freedman