

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Terumah)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From **Rav Binny Freedman**

Sixteen hundred Jews, mostly the elderly and families with children, protected by barely two hundred fighters; the odds for the Jewish quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem in 1948, were beyond impossible. The Jordanian Legion, by far the best fighting force in the Middle East, committed an entire division of 3,200 men, their most elite fighting force, to win this battle. Approximately 30,000 Arab irregulars, local Arabs with a gun and a cause, supported them; the Jews were in desperate straits.

There were no reinforcements to be had, but the Israeli fighters, against all odds, refused to give up. They had only three heavy machine guns between them, and one of them was positioned in a sandbag position on the edge of the Churvah Synagogue, a stone's throw away from the Arab shuk. Sitting at the strategic juncture of the widest alleyway into the Jewish quarter, the Jordanians mounted daily and often twice-daily attacks, in full battalion strength, against this three-man Israeli machine-gun position.

Because of the strategic sensitivity of the position, the three men posted there were given very specific orders: they were not allowed to leave the position under any circumstances unless someone came to relieve them. As such, a runner who would dash between the positions avoiding the Jordanian snipers, brought their meals to them.

One afternoon, the men manning the position realized that their lunch had not arrived. With no radio, and no way to contact the runner, they had no option other than to wait and hope their lunch would arrive sooner rather than later. But, as the afternoon wore on and the sun sank lower on the horizon, they began to worry as a myriad of thoughts and possibilities assaulted them. What if the Jordanians had somehow circled around behind them and cut them off? What if the positions behind them had already been over-run?

Finally, as darkness approached, one of them decided to venture out into the street and see if he could get a better picture of what was going on. And that was when he discovered Nissim Ginni, the youngest Israeli soldier ever to fall on active duty.

Hit by sniper fire not ten yards from where they were sitting, Nissim, a runner whose mischievous grin and flashing eyes had shored up the men on the most desperate occasions, was only ten years old.

The most puzzling part of his death was that he had been hit in the stomach and quite obviously bled to death. A stomach wound is an extremely painful injury, and very often the loss of consciousness in such circumstances is relatively slow. All of which left the men wondering why Nissim had not at the very least called out to them and asked for help. They were, after all, close enough that they would most certainly have heard his cries and been able to come to his assistance.

The theory was that Nissim understood what calling out to his comrades would have meant. Sniper fire is the most surreal type of warfare; you don't realize at first what is happening, because with all the normal noise of warfare, and the distance of a good sniper, you don't even hear the shot. In the movies, you always know there is a sniper because of the music; but in real life there is no music: most often, by the time you comprehend that you are under fire, it is too late. Realizing that if he cried out the men would come to his aid, Nissim Ginni, a ten-year-old boy, chose to bleed to death all alone in an alleyway, rather than risk the lives of his comrades.

The question this leaves us with is whether it was worth it. A ten year old boy, and countless others, gave their lives for a hilltop city smaller than the size of most University campuses, and the question so many pundits are asking is: can a piece of land ever be worth such a price? Is there anything we can say, standing over the grave of Nissim Ginni, re-buried on the Mount of Olives in 1967, that makes sense of all this?

What, indeed, is the seemingly incomprehensible preoccupation we seem to have with land and can any piece of property ever be worth fighting, much less dying for?

This week's portion, *Terumah*, introduces us to one of the most challenging concepts in Judaism.

"Ve'Asu' Li' Mikdash, Ve'Shachanti' Be'Tocham."

"And they shall make for me a sanctuary, and I will dwell in their midst." (Shemot 25:8)

Hashem wants... what, exactly? A home? A sanctuary? The most obvious difficulty with this idea is why, and in fact, *how* G-d, the endless unlimited One, can or would be confined to a limited space? One of the first things we learn about G-d as children is that G-d, Hashem, is everywhere. Indeed, this is one of the foundations of Judaism, which arguably differentiate it from Christianity: that G-d cannot be physical.

Maimonides, in his *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* (Laws of the Foundations of Torah 1:7) makes clear that if G-d were physical, He would have a beginning and an end, which is antithetical to the basic tenets of Judaism. So how can G-d, the Endless One, have a physical home? And why is this concept introduced here, immediately after the giving of the Torah and its laws at Sinai, which has been the focus of these last two portions (*Yitro and Mishpatim*)?

It is also interesting to note that the manner in which we are asked to fulfill this mitzvah is unique up to this point in Jewish history. The normal fashion in which we are given a mitzvah is in the form of a command, or obligation. And while our challenge is to view such obligations as opportunities, in the end, as Jews, they are very clearly presented in the Torah as being a demand. The Torah does not suggest that we might be interested in celebrating Shabbat, or respecting our parents. G-d demands these mitzvot, as an example, in the Ten Commandments. But this mitzvah, to build a sanctuary, is quite different:

*"Speak to the children of Israel, and let them take for me **Terumah** (offerings); from everyone whose heart prompts him, shall you take my offerings." (25:1)*

We are not commanded, it seems, to build a sanctuary, we are, rather, asked to donate the necessary materials for this first Jewish building project. Indeed, this appears to be the first Federation capital campaign! Why is the building of the Tabernacle, clearly the forerunner of the Temple, one of the most central ideas in Judaism, only based on voluntary giving? (And even if this ‘volunteerism’ was merely the opportunity to decide how much to give, within the context of an obligation to give something, the language of the text clearly suggests volunteerism, which would leave us with the same question: why was this meant to be associated with a desire to give, as opposed to an obligation?)

There is a fascinating and well-known debate as to the motivation behind this ‘commandment’.

Rashi suggests (31:18) that although this commandment appears two whole portions before the account of the sin of the Golden calf, the Torah is not necessarily in chronological order, and the mitzvah to build a sanctuary actually *follows* the sin of the Golden calf. Indeed, many have suggested that we were given the mitzvah to build the sanctuary as a *result* of the debacle of the Golden calf, which raises a challenging question: if, indeed, the opportunity to build a physical sanctuary for G-d is a way for us to atone for the mistake we made in building a Golden calf, then the mitzvah to build a sanctuary is only the result of our mistake. Which means that in an ideal world, we would not have sinned and consequently would not need to build such a sanctuary!

Can it be that ideally Judaism would be better off without a Temple? Does this mean that ideally we would and should not have a need to focus our attentions on physical space, but that the goal should have been to see all space as equally holy? Would we be better off without a Temple?

Perhaps it is for this reason that the **Ramban** vehemently disagrees with Rashi’s approach. According to the Ramban (25:1), the commandment to build G-d a sanctuary on earth appears before the Golden calf, because it was *given* prior to the sin of the calf.

Building G-d a sanctuary on earth is one of the most basic ideas in Judaism, and was not, suggests the Ramban, the result of a mistake, but rather an ideal given as part of G-d’s plan for the Jewish people and the world exactly when we were meant to receive it, immediately after the Sinai experience.

Indeed, the Torah suggests very clearly that the idea of a Temple exists prior to the Golden calf, as, for example in the Song of the Sea. Seven weeks prior to their arrival at Sinai, and over three months before the Golden Calf, the Jews, after the splitting of the Sea sing:

“You shall bring them in (the Jews) and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance, in the place you have worked to sit in, a Temple (“Mikdash”) of G-d have your hands prepared.” (Shemot 15:17)

This obvious reference to the dream of a Temple on “the mountain”, clearly demonstrates that the idea of a temple was not, in its entirety, the result of the Golden calf.

Indeed, even according to Rashi, one need not suggest that just because the commandment to build a tabernacle in the desert was the result of the Golden calf that the

same would necessarily hold true for the permanent Temple we would one day build in the land of Israel.

Rashi was certainly well aware of the above-mentioned verse (and many others) and may merely have been suggesting that in an ideal world we would never have needed a temporary *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), and would have gone directly to Israel to build the more permanent Temple in Jerusalem.

Which of course, leaves us wondering why the mistake of the Golden calf, according to Rashi, demonstrated the need for building G-d a physical space much sooner? And if this supposition is correct, both Rashi and the Ramban (and everyone else) sees the need for a physical home for G-d as essential to Judaism and to the Jewish people's mission on earth. Why?

The Ramban, in discussing the goal of building this sanctuary for G-d in the desert, says that the essence of this *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) was to recreate the Sinai experience, wherein G-d's presence dwelled on the mountain. (19:20).

In other words, the mitzvah to build a physical space on earth for G-d's presence stems from the first physical place where G-d chose to 'dwell' on earth: Mount Sinai. Indeed, the very notion of receiving the Torah from G-d at Mount Sinai raises, essentially, the same question as does the *Mishkan*: why did we, as a people have to go to a specific mountain in order to receive the Torah? If G-d is everywhere, what difference did it make where we were when we received the Torah? We could have been anywhere in the desert; in fact, we could have received the Torah immediately after the splitting of the Sea, when it is clear the Jewish people were on an incredibly high level, having just witnessed G-d's presence in the world on an unprecedented level. So why did G-d's presence need to be associated with such a specific place?

The idea of a heightened relationship with G-d and the ability to connect with G-d seems almost always to occur in connection with space. Moses' relationship with G-d begins at the Burning Bush on Mount Chorev, which is very clearly the same mountain we will later refer to as Sinai.

And all of the forefathers have intense spiritual experiences associated with specific spaces. Abraham has to take his beloved son Yitzchak all the way to Mount Moriah (which Jewish tradition has as the same mountain where the Temple will one day stand), and Yitzchak, just prior to his marriage with Rivkah goes out to pray "in the field". Why does he need to be in the field? What difference does it make *where* you are when you pray? Shouldn't it be all about *who* you are? And Yaakov has his famous dream of angels and ladders in Beit El, where he ultimately declares:

"Indeed G-d is in this place!" (Genesis 28:16)

But isn't G-d in every place? Why and how could G-d be limited to place, and space? In fact, the very dawn of Judaism carries this same challenge: the first command G-d gives Abraham is to go *"...to the land that I will show you."* (Genesis 12:1) Why does Abraham even need to go to a specific land? If his mission is to bring G-d into the world, why can't he get started right away in Mesopotamia?

This mitzvah forces us to confront one of the most basic themes in Judaism: the seeming need for creating sacred space. This central position in Judaism is one we are confronted with every time we go to pray in a synagogue.

In fact, the ultimate and inevitable result of this philosophy has the entire Jewish people, and one might easily argue (based on the disproportionate attention in the media) the entire world focused on the crisis in the Middle East. Two groups of people completely at odds over a strip of land so small, that the name 'Israel' doesn't even fit inside the country on standard globes. And to what end? Why is owning this piece of property so important?

Of course, the essence of this struggle is very clearly not just over the Land of Israel, but also over the city of Jerusalem, and specifically over a small mountain made holy because of a building, long since destroyed, which sat on top of a very special rock. Known as the *Even Yetzirah*, or *Foundation Rock*, Jewish tradition suggests that it was from this holy slab of rock, over which the Temple was built three thousand years ago that the earth was formed. And the Muslims believe that this very same rock, over which the fifteen hundred year old Dome of the Rock stands today, is the spot where Mohammed's steed *Burak* rose to heaven, and as such is one of their holy sites as well.

Can you imagine? The entire Middle East crisis, five wars in the last fifty years, and the majority of the world poised for what could become a global confrontation, all over who gets the deed to... a rock?

Is any space worth so much pain and suffering? Are we all mad? What lies at the root of this concept of sacred space that is apparently so essential to what Judaism stands for?

One way of exploring the nature of this entire concept might be to understand why Rashi feels that the mistake of the Golden calf necessitated a temporary physical sanctuary for G-d in the desert, perhaps even before originally planned. What does the Golden calf have to do with building a Tabernacle?

Think about it: people often assume that the Golden calf was such a great transgression on the part of the Jewish people because six weeks after hearing the Ten Commandments, including: "*Thou shalt have no other gods before me*", the Jews seemingly 'forgot' all about G-d, and sank back into their Egyptian habits and idolatries. But in truth, that would be incomprehensible. Could anyone, after hearing the word of G-d directly, and while still at the very foot of Sinai, forget such a basic truth as the Oneness of G-d?

No, the Jewish people's mistake at Sinai was not that they forgot about G-d; it was that they weren't quite sure what to *do* with G-d. If the challenge we received at Sinai was to make this entire physical, temporal world a sanctuary for G-d, how are we meant to do that? How can we, as physical beings, create a relationship with something as endless and intangible as G-d?

Indeed, it is interesting that the mistake of the Golden calf begins somehow when the people lose touch with Moshe.

"*Va'Yar Ha'Am Ki' Boshesh Moshe*", "*And the people saw that Moshe tarried.*" (32:1)

The people, perhaps, were looking to Moshe to be the medium through which they related to G-d, much like the high priests of Egypt they were so accustomed to. But Judaism does not believe in anyone coming in between our creator and us. Each of us has to find our own personal path to a relationship with G-d.

And it may have made a lot of sense to the people that Moshe was not coming down off the mountain; after all, the goal may have been for the individual to leave this physical world behind and embrace the spiritual existence that lies beyond the physical. But again, this is not Judaism. Judaism has never suggested that one comes closer to the spiritual essence of G-d by abandoning the physical world. In Judaism, the goal is not to find G-d on top of Mount Sinai; the goal is to bring G-d down below.

Can I infuse the physical world with the spiritual essence of G-d? This is the ultimate question posited to us as a people at Sinai. And this is why the Jewish people attempt to infuse the very spiritual experience of Sinai, which began with three days of separation and purification (19:10-11,15), with the very physical experience of the Golden calf.

But they were sadly mistaken, because in the end, they were not infusing the physical with the spiritual, they were merely creating a purely physical experience alongside a purely spiritual one.

So often, when we speak of the value of the physical world in Judaism, we mistakenly believe that physical experiences are as important as spiritual ones. And we separate the two, by assuming the one or the other. We consider eating to be a physical experience, and prayer or Torah study to be spiritual in nature. But Judaism suggests that the very physical act of eating needs as well to be a spiritual high and the act of prayer needs to be wrapped up in the physical as well.

There is a beautiful *Mishnah* in *Ethics of the Fathers*, which teaches that a person who interrupts his Torah study by exclaiming: “How beautiful is this tree!” literally is worthy of forfeiting his life. **Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch** points out that this does not mean a person should not interrupt his Torah study to wonder at the beauty of the trees. Rather, it means that if the beauty of nature and the world is an *interruption* of one’s Torah study, then there is something wrong with said person’s relationship with Torah. Because the beauty inherent in all of creation is not an interruption of one’s relationship with G-d, it is *part* of it.

However, this is a very dangerous position, because it is all too easy to sink from this idea to the perception that physical beauty is the goal, instead of a vehicle for a deeper relationship with G-d the Creator. And indeed, as **Maimonides** suggests in his *Laws of Idolatry* (1:1-5), this is precisely the mistake that leads to idolatry, when we begin to substitute the means for the ends. We begin praying to the sun as a magnificent reminder of the awesome majesty of G-d in the physical world, but very quickly we forget that the sun is a vehicle to a relationship with G-d, and we start to think that the sun is G-d.

Indeed, this is very much the challenge we face today: so often, people confuse the ends and the means, and whenever we make any means into an end, or purpose, we are ultimately creating our own idols. If money is a goal instead of a magnificent vehicle for good in this world, then it has become an idol. And I can make anything into an idol: power, health, the body, even myself; in fact, even the Torah can become an idol. If

Torah ceases to be a vehicle for making the world a better place and becomes rather, the goal, where people learn Torah simply to become Torah scholars, then Torah has been transformed into a form of idolatry.

And this was the dangerous mistake the Jewish people fell into with the Golden calf, where they were not infusing a physical experience with spiritual sanctity, but rather demonstrating the value of the physical experience in the shadow of a spiritual one. And as they were only a short distance away from completely worshipping that physical experience, something had to give.

All of which is why the response, according to Rashi (or the initial goal according to the Ramban who may have believed the obvious danger of this mistake was so obvious that it was always part of Judaism to create a system to prevent this sad occurrence.) was to build a Mishkan. And in this Mishkan were a holy, and a Holy of Holies. And inside this Holy of Holies, on top of the ark, were none other than two cherubs, little golden angel-winged... idols! And these idols, made of gold, are at the epicenter of the holiest spot in Judaism. Because only in such a spiritual place can we recognize the challenge and the value of synthesizing both the physical and the spiritual into one, with the aim of bringing G-d into the world, through us.

This is the concept of sacred space. Every great idea and every worthy goal needs a focal point, and if the mission of the Jewish people on this world is to bring G-d into the world, then the challenge of infusing the physical world with spiritual beauty begins with that rock where tradition has it the world was first created, because the entire purpose of physical creation, was to allow us as human beings to be partners with G-d in creating a holy world. And the definition of holiness is seeing G-d in every physical reality, every flower and every tree, every bug and every grape.

Which is why we need a land; every nation needs a land, because only in connecting with land that is our own, can we really achieve as a people that ideal of transforming the physical, limited experience of dirt under our finger nails into the spiritual majesty of getting one's hands dirty building a place for the endlessness of G-d in our seemingly limited physical reality.

Incidentally, this may be why this Mitzvah is couched in the language of voluntary contribution, because this is the essence of what each of us has to give on this earth. The goal of this entire exercise, is that deep within our own physical reality, we succeed in tapping into our spiritual essence the image of G-d in which we are created. We achieve that mostly by what we give in this world, of our own volition.

In the narrow alleyways of the old city of Jerusalem, we are not struggling over a mere piece of rock. We are fighting for a way of life, and the belief that everything physical is imbued with spiritual sanctity. The path to G-d is not to deny the physical and reach out to spirituality in its rawest form. Our purpose is to see and indeed infuse all things physical with the inner spiritual beauty hidden within.

That is why Judaism cannot make peace with the idea of a person blowing himself to bits along with so many innocent people in the service of G-d. If the physical world is merely an obstacle; an entrapment to be overcome, then the loss of any and all physical bodies in the journey to a relationship with G-d is not only justified, it is to be commended. The

Shahid (martyr) is glorified in so many Islamic circles, because such a person has let go of the illusion of the physical as being important, and embraced the spiritual realm beyond the physical world as the true goal of life.

Judaism however, does not view such a departure as the goal, because in Judaism the goal is to see the spiritual beauty in all living things, and all human beings, be they Muslim or Jew, Christian or Buddhist. Indeed, this has much to do with the Jewish principle of resurrection, which suggests that one day we will be re-united with our physical bodies, because the goal, again, is to bring G-d into the physical world, and not the other way around.

We are not just fighting over a piece of rock. In the end, we are fighting for the principal that even a piece of rock can become holy, and if even a rock can contain the spiritual essence of G-d, then so must all living creatures, and all human beings.

And this is the essence of peace or Shalom, which, by definition also means complete or whole. Because only when the entire world sees the spiritual beauty of G-d in all created and all living, and especially all human beings, will we all be together, in a truly whole and complete world.

Shabbat Shalom,

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