

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Terumah)

The radio squawked, and the voice over the other end began issuing commands; it was our company commander and we were preparing for an unexpected mission op. It was an innocuous moment; I had to take my pen & pad out of my pocket to write down a list of code words for map locations that I would then need to translate into coordinates for our impromptu mission: where was our drop off point; who would I be rendezvousing with, on what frequency, at what time, and so on. This was a procedure that was part and parcel of being a combat officer in the field and was really not a big deal. If anything, relative to some of the pressures that most probably lay ahead later that evening it was a moment most soldiers, especially in Lebanon in 1985, would not think twice about.

But for me it was a watershed moment. Because I was being asked to write down a list of coordinates on Shabbat, and I had never, in my entire life, ever lifted up a pen to write on the Sabbath. It's usually not the big events that stop you in your tracks, because you've had time to think about them; life gives you pause in the little details. As a religious soldier I knew what I had signed up for, and had given much thought to the fact that I would be protecting Jewish lives and would need to drive and use the radio on Shabbat, and it was for me not the violation of a religious principle, but the upholding of one. But I was still caught unprepared when I realized I would need to write in a pad, with the pen in my pocket, on Shabbat.

A list of questions and doubts unexpectedly assailed me. I had no doubt that halachically speaking, I was in the right, and it was permissible to transgress the Shabbat whilst on active duty and with even the possibility that what I was doing was protecting lives. Rabbi Shimon in the tractate of Shabbat, suggests clearly that it is better to transgress one Shabbat in order to preserve a life and with it the ability to fulfill many more Shabbatot in the future.

*What I was more worried about was how it might affect my **desire** to continue celebrating Shabbat in the future? If Shabbat was suddenly the same as any other day, and if on Shabbat I was driving, using the radio, writing down coordinates, and so, what would be left of Shabbat for me after a year or more on active combat duty? It suddenly hit me that in Lebanon, Shabbat was like any other day; the terrorists and the Syrians don't allow you to stop on Shabbat; so what would become of my Shabbat and with it my Jewish journey, in the process?*

This week's portion of *Terumah*, introduces a new concept; the idea of a sanctuary, a tabernacle, the fore-runner of the Temple designed to create a space for G-d in the world.

The Zohar suggests this is meant to be a “*dirah ba'tachtonim*”, a dwelling place for G-d down below.

But how and why would we be commanded to create a physical space for G-d? As no less than **Shlomo Hamelech** (King Solomon) suggested at the dedication of the first Temple:

“But will G-d really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!” (I Kings 8: 27)

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests in his *Covenant and Conversation*:

“Making a home in finite space for an infinite presence seems a contradiction in terms.”

Interestingly, while the Tabernacle is clearly the predecessor to what will eventually give way to the building of the *Beit ha'Mikdash*, the Temple, in Jerusalem, there is a fundamental difference between the two:

The Temple would stand in a fixed place at the center of the Jewish universe, in Jerusalem, whereas the *Mishkan* (the Tabernacle) would travel with the Jewish people without a pre-determined set location. Even today, Jews pray facing the site of the Holy Temple, while there is no such custom regarding the place of the Tabernacle.

In fact, *Rav Avraham Yitzchak haKohein Kook* was once asked why a Jew would be allowed to travel through the Sinai desert when he might accidentally walk on the site where the holy of holies once stood. His response (in his *Mishpat Kohein*) is that the sanctity of the Mishkan was temporary; once the Jewish people moved on there was no lasting sanctity to the places where it once stood.

Which is in direct contrast to the Temple on whose direct site all the authorities agree no Jew can traverse today.

Rashi suggests that the commandment to build a Mishkan was actually a result of the debacle of the sin of the Golden Calf. And while that topic is too lengthy for this article, one might suggest that at the foot of Sinai the Jewish people, feeling distant from Moshe, felt the need to create a physical tangible manifestation of G-d's presence in order to create a reminder that G-d is with them, always. Indeed the Hebrew word for calf: *Egel* is also the word for a circle (*igul*), the closest physical manifestation of perfection in this world. The Jewish people, so soon after the revelation at Sinai had not forgotten G-d, they simply had no idea how to *manifest* G-d in a physical tangible reality.

So, according to Rashi, G-d gave us a Mishkan, a place that would travel with us, which was really less about where *it* stood than about where *we* stood. It was a call to the Jewish people to create holy space wherever we were. And for a people destined to wander the face of the globe for millennium it was the beginning of the secret to our survival. In fact, one might suggest that this was the predecessor to the Jewish synagogue.

The synagogue is called a Beit Knesset, which really means a house, not of worship but of gathering. The Hebrew word *kaneh* means to collect or gather, as Esther suggests to Mordechai in the Purim story:

*“Lech Kanos et Kal ha'yehudim...” “Go and **gather** all the Jews...”*

Judaism teaches us that we can create an environment of sanctity which can deeply impact us, by gathering together, and we create this space not by where we are, but by who we are. Which is perhaps why the space of the Mishkan was only holy when it was with the Jewish people; once we moved in the desert, which is not really a place, it did not remain sanctified.

And for thousands of years of exile we created our synagogue spaces wherever we were, and more than we maintained the synagogue, the synagogue space maintained us. And we learned that what we can create alone will never match what we can create together.

The *Beit Hamkidash* (Temple in Jerusalem) was designed to create an environment the way it was meant to be, and the *Mishkan* was designed to teach us that we could start working on creating such environments wherever we were.

Which is why the verse commanding us to build such a sanctuary alludes to this:

“Ve’asu lim mikdash ve’shachanti be’tocham.”

“They shall make a sanctuary for Me, and I will dwell in them [betocham]”

The verse should have said ‘I will dwell in **it**’ not ‘I will dwell in **them**’.

The Torah is teaching us that Hashem does not dwell in a building; Hashem lies deep inside each one of us; the Mishkan and the Synagogue is just a taste of that experience as it is meant to be.

And in Lebanon back in 1985, I discovered that whether making Kiddush in the mud before an ambush or singing the Shabbat services to myself while patrolling what we called death valley in the *Beka*, Shabbat is not about where you are, it is really about who you are, and it is with you wherever you go; all you have to do is let it in

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman