

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

(Portion of Terumah)

There are some lessons you learn the hard way, and they are never forgotten.

In Infantry Officer's training there is an obstacle course in a place called the Wingate Institute, known as the "A'son Teva" (Freak of Nature...). It is an appropriate name for this visit to hell. No cadet can graduate Officer's course without completing this test. We were made to do a number of dry runs before the actual test day, but being 'dry' had nothing to do with it. In full uniform and gear, with your gun slung over your back, at one point you have to wade through an ice-cold river that gets up to your chest. When you wade out, the first thing that hits you is a 6-meter (18 foot) rope you have to climb.

Soaked from the river, with all the extra weight of the water in your gear and on your clothes, not to mention the psychological pressure of men behind you, and commanders screaming at you, that rope looms up before you like an insurmountable mountain. You only have so much time to finish the entire course, which means you have a little less than a minute to get up that rope, or you don't make the grade, and have to do the entire course over again.

I never thought I would ever make it up that that rope. But there was an officer who was responsible for running us through the drill and teaching us the finer arts of the course, who was there with us on the final day when the test would count. He was a short little guy, who wore the beret of the paratroopers, and throughout the training I had wondered how he had made it through his training; he couldn't have been more than five feet tall! Just before we began the run, he walked over to me, seeing the tension on my face, and said, with a big grin: "Im Tirtzu', Ein Zo' Aggadah".

This was the famous line from Theodore Herzl, who, when asked a hundred years ago how he could devote himself to the fairy tale legend that the Jewish people, without the support of a single nation on the face of the earth would return to the land of Israel and build their own state, replied: "If you want it enough, it will not remain a legend". And I got it; you don't climb ropes with muscle, you climb them with willpower.

Leaving Mount Sinai behind them, in the middle of the desert, the Jewish People are given a new challenge: In this week's portion, *Terumah*, Hashem (G-d) asks of us to build for Him a *Mishkan*, a Tabernacle. This *Mishkan* had an interesting pre-condition to being built.

Apparently, the initial commandment to gather the materials necessary for building this *Mishkan* was meant to be on a voluntary basis only.

"Ve'Yikchu Li Terumah, Me'Et Kol Ish Asher Yidvenu Libo'..."

"...That they should take for me offerings ("Terumah"), from each person whose heart desires (to give)..." (Exodus 25:2).

Moshe is given a clear imperative, to collect from the Jewish people all the money and material necessary to build the *Mishkan* and yet, he can only collect from those who give voluntarily. Was this a command to volunteer? Or was there no obligation to donate unless a person was moved to do so?

Indeed, the *Mitzvah* to build the *Mikdash* is a Biblical obligation, and certainly one of the 613 *Mitzvoth* listed in the Torah. Which raises the question as to what this 'enforced volunteerism' was all about? One

wonders what would have happened if no one had ‘volunteered’ to donate the necessary materials; apparently, there would have been no *Beit HaMikdash*!

So it would seem that one of the most crucial ideas in Judaism, the *Beit HaMikdash*, is completely dependent on the whim and fancy of the Jewish people; something which needs to be understood.

Even more challenging, the building of the *Mishkan* (and later the *Beit Hamikdash*) also seems to run counter to one of the basic principles of Judaism.

Most of the major rabbinic authorities concur, that in general, “*Mitzvoth Einan Tzrichot Kavanah*”, which means that *Mitzvoth* do not require intent.

Ultimately, the fulfillment of a *mitzvah* is dependant upon the commission of an action, and not on the *Kavanah*, or intent, which is meant to accompany it. If I am not hungry all day on Yom Kippur, and end up fasting the entire day, despite having no idea that it is Yom Kippur or that there is a *mitzvah* to fast on that day, I nonetheless fulfill the *mitzvah*, because in the end, I have indeed fasted on Yom Kippur. (Or if I jump into a pool to swim and it happens to be a *mikveh*, a Jewish ritual bath, the same would apply...)

But in this case, it is apparent that without the intent, or *Kavanah*, the *mitzvah* is meaningless! If I donate all the gold and silver in the world for the *Mikdash*, but I just want to clear my warehouse, and have no intention of donating this material for the purpose of building a *Mikdash*, my *mitzvah* is meaningless!

In fact, **Rashi** here on our verse points out that the word “*Li*”, “*for my name*”, really means: “*Le’Shemi*”: “*for the purpose of my name*”.

So this *mitzvah*, of building the *Mishkan*, more than any other *mitzvah*, is entirely dependant on the desire of the individual. If the Jewish people don’t really *want* a *Mikdash*, then there won’t *be* a *Mikdash*.

Why is this *mitzvah* so different from other *mitzvoth* that it so depends on the desire of the individual fulfilling it? Especially when considering the blanket statement in the Talmud (*Pesachim* 50b): “A person should *always* (“*Le’Olam...*”) be involved with Torah and *mitzvoth* even when the motivation is not purely for the sake of the *mitzvah* (“*Le’Shema*”), because things done *without* a pure motivation, will eventually lead to things done *with* a pure motivation.

Judaism clearly suggests that what I do has a powerful effect on who I am, and ultimately even on my thought process, motivation, and intentions.

If you want to become a better person, suggests Jewish tradition (in a variety of sources), behave as though you already are that better person, and you will ultimately become him... So why is this not true when building the *Beit Hamikdash*?

Interestingly there are other instances where a *Mitzvah*, according to those same sources, does indeed require intent as a pre-requisite to fulfillment.

For example, if I am out for a run one fine Rosh Hashanah day, and, passing the local synagogue, I hear the Shofar, I have not fulfilled the *mitzvah* unless I know it is Rosh Hashanah, and I intend to fulfill the

mitzvah when hearing the Shofar! So why is Shofar different from other *mitzvot* (such as tefillin, or the eating of matzah...)?

Rav Chaim Brisker suggests quite simply that unlike other *mitzvot*, where the intention and feeling (the *Kavanah*) is *additional* to the *mitzvah*, here, the *mitzvah* of Shofar is the feeling. It is precisely the motivation to do *Teshuvah* (Repentance) and return to whom I was once meant to be, that is the essence of the *mitzvah* of Shofar. The same is true for Prayer; without the desire and understanding of what prayer is all about, I am in fact, not even close to fulfilling the *mitzvah*, which is why Maimonides rules in much the same way regarding prayer as he does with Shofar; without the proper intention and feeling, one cannot fulfill the *mitzvah*, because the *mitzvah* is to experience that feeling.

If I am just saying the words without any accompanying thought process or desire, then there is, it seems, really no point to praying!

All of which points to the fact that if the *mitzvah* of building the *Mikdash* cannot be fulfilled without the proper desire and intent, then somehow, concerning the building of the *Mikdash*, the devotion and intention is the *mitzvah*.

Which leaves us wondering why the *Beit HaMikdash* would be considered meaningless if it were built (or even planned) without the proper desire or intent?

Deeply intertwined with this question of course, is the larger question regarding the building of a *Beit HaMikdash*: why does Hashem, in the end, require such a space? What in fact, does it mean that there is a place where I can connect with Hashem more than any other place? Isn't G-d everywhere? And why is this *mitzvah* given to the Jewish people here, almost immediately after Sinai, in the middle of the desert?

To place this in its proper perspective it must be noted that there is a fascinating debate as to the relationship between this *mitzvah* (to build the tabernacle), and the sin of the Golden Calf.

Rashi maintains that the opportunity to build a *Mishkan* was given *as a result of* the mistake of the golden calf.

The **Ramban**, however, vehemently disagrees, maintaining that chronologically this *mitzvah* was given *before* the sin of the Golden Calf.

Consequently, the Jewish people are given the opportunity to build a *Mishkan* while still on the verge of entering the Land of Israel, and building the Tabernacle becomes a necessary prerequisite to entering the Land. Somehow, the *Mishkan*, like the *Mikdash* later on, are intimately connected to entering and living in the Land of Israel. Why was the *Mikdash* only necessary in Israel?

Obviously, G-d doesn't 'need' a *Mikdash*; in point of fact, G-d doesn't 'need' at all. The concept of needing implies a deficiency that needs to be filled. So obviously Hashem has no need for space in general, including the particular space of a *Mikdash*. Rather, we need the *Mikdash*.

The *Mishkan* is our introduction to the concept of elevating the space-less through space; of reaching the unlimited through the defined.

Everything about the *Mishkan* (and, later, the *Beit Hamikdash*) was designed to arouse our desire to become better, to *be* better. The detail of the artwork, the nature of the materials used, the ideas behind the functions of different vessels, not to mention all the details of the process of offering up sacrifices...all this was designed to elevate a human being to a different consciousness.

The essence of the service in the Temple was what a person felt, and not what he was doing. The goal was a rediscovery of who we could be, and a re-awakening to what we were meant to become. So if a person was going through all the right motions, but it wasn't combined with an arousal of the heart, then he had missed the point; he was missing the essence of the entire *mitzvah*.

The *Mikdash* was meant to be a lesson of the effect of the right environment on all that we do, and all that we are. This is also the essence of the idea that we as a people need to be in such an environment, the Land of Israel, all the time. (Hence the connection between the two...)

One wonders, however, whether the idea goes even deeper. Sometimes, an action done without the necessary motivation does far more than render the action meaningless, sometimes, such an action can damage the soul.

The example, par excellence' of this, is the *mitzvah* of living in the Land of Israel. There is no doubt that a Jew's place is in the land of Israel. And that one fulfills a great number of *Mitzvoth* in Israel, simply in the day to day of living there. Why, then, when the Jews' behavior was distancing them from Hashem and His Torah, did G-d exile us from the land of Israel?

One would have thought that at the very least, if the Jews were living in the land of Israel, they would be fulfilling a great number of *Mitzvoth*, even without the proper intent.

Perhaps once we, as a people, were no longer fulfilling the essence of the *mitzvah* of living in the land of Israel, nor living and breathing the essence of the *mitzvah* we were given in the *Beit HaMikdash*, we had to lose those *mitzvah*. Because to 'perform' them without really fulfilling them would have been destructive to who we are as a people.

And if this is so, perhaps any *mitzvah* whose essence is the service of the heart ("*Avodah She'Ba'Lev*") becomes destructive if we allow it to become divorced from the heart, whose inspiration forms the basis for that *mitzvah*.

One wonders how destructive a prayer service mumbled without meaning, where the Rabbi gets hoarse reminding everyone to stop talking, can be.

And one wonders whether it was this type of performance, devoid of any feeling or desire that led so many Jews to leave the beauty of *Mitzvoth* behind, in search of disciplines that would bring back the fire and joy they thirsted for. Much like the actor, who cannot fulfill his role in the performance devoid of passion, it is the passion of the heart, which forms the core of what Judaism is meant to be.

Jewish tradition calls every human being a "*Mikdash Me'at*", a 'small temple'. Just as the *Mikdash* is built from our hearts' desires, creating an environment that allows our souls to sing, so each one of us has the capacity to create our own environment, our own world, wherein we can cause our souls to sing.

We look at the Temple as a building, made of stone, and filled with gold. But that is just an illusion. The essence of the *Mikdash* is the love and joy, the desire we have, to come closer to G-d in this world. That is the foundation on which the world can become holy, and allows each and every one of us, to bring G-d into this world.

The truth is, we can never get all the way there until we are united as people, in our own land, in the home Hashem has promised us. Perhaps that is because ultimately, we can only go so far in this world, and if we get as far as we can on our own, Hashem will meet us halfway, then together, as a united people, we can build a home with Hashem as our partner.

This work begins with each and every one of us building our own *Mikdash Me'at*. We have the capacity to create our own mini-Mikdash; our own world based on love and harmony, joy and belief. This desire is the beginning of the process that affects the entire world.

So many times, when the challenge of building that *Mikdash Me'at*, and creating that world of joy and beauty seemed so difficult, I am reminded that it's not about where you are, it's about who you are.

Each of us has the ability to create our own *Mikdash*, and while we do not get to choose the world we are given, each of us faced with our unique challenges, we are masters of the world we choose to live in. We have the ability to become much more than the person we are meant to be; we can actually become a *Mikdash*, a place for others to be with, as well.

Perhaps this is why Hashem gives us this challenge immediately after Sinai, in the middle of the desert; because who you are is not really about where you are, it is about where you choose to be.

So often, we are overwhelmed by the circumstances that surround us, allowing the daily challenges to become the essence of our reality. The portion of *Terumah* comes to remind us that reality is not just something we are given, it is something we are partners in creating.

"Me'Et Kol Ish Asher Yidvenu Libo' ", says Hashem.
(*"From each person whose heart desires (to give)"*)

The foundation of all that we do is the essence of what we really want. The question Hashem asks us to consider as we embark upon the building of the *Mishkan*, and later the *Mikdash* is "what do we want?".

If we want to be in a place that will awaken in us the thirst for a better world, and the belief that we can be partners in creating it, the journey begins inside each one of us. The bricks and mortar, gold and silver, are just the trappings. The real building begins with the heart.

Shabbat Shalom,

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