

Terumah and Tables

This week's Torah portion, Terumah, focuses on the very detailed specifications for creating the furnishings of the Mishkan: the movable sanctuary in the wilderness. In it we read this:

V'asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham - And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.....Exactly as I show you - the pattern of the Tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings – so shall you make it. (Ex 25:8-9)

And with this command, Moses and the Israelites began both a capital campaign and a construction project – collecting gold, silver and precious gifts for the building of the portable temple.

Nachmanides, a 13th century Torah commentator, believed that we kept the experience of Mount Sinai and receiving the Ten Commandments alive by building this Sanctuary, and that the mystery of this structure is that God's Presence – the feminine, indwelling aspect of God known as the Shechinah, would dwell there.

This evocative concept quickly gets lost for the reader, with the ensuing, excruciating details for creating the ark, the menorah, the table for the bread, the curtains, the enclosures and all the other accessories. So where are we supposed to find God among all these details?

I do not know the answer to this, but, for some reason, my attention was drawn during my Torah studies this time round to the table in the Sanctuary, the *shulchan*. This holy table was made of acacia (*acaysha*) wood and it was overlaid with pure gold. The table was designed to accommodate the 12 loaves of showbread that were displayed for an entire week until Shabbat. I wondered what can be so inspirational or interesting about a table?

So I thought about the different tables that I had sat at over the years, and how they served in my life. The sweetest memories were around the large dining room table in my parents' home where we gathered with family and friends for birthdays, shivas, holidays, any excuse for getting together. I remember many

precious and holy moments of interacting, laughter, tears, hugs, conversations, and kindnesses that were experienced there.

Then there was the picnic table that I woke up on top of one summer. I was eight years old. My family had taken a vacation to Cape Cod, and my father decided he was going to try eating a lobster for the first time. He went into the restaurant to order, while the rest of us waited outside, seated around a wooden picnic table. My father returned with a tray full of the sea creatures and sat down. I watched as he took one of the creatures, and cracked a leg off it, then dug a fork into the body. That's when I fainted.

And then I recalled a fascinating spiritual teaching about tables from my studies last year with Reb Daniel Siegel, my mentor and teacher. Bahya ben Asher was a 13th century kabbalist and Torah commentator. He was the author of a manual for ethical and mindful eating called *Shulchan Shel Arba, Table of Four*.

This manual reveals that sitting together for meals can elevate our relationships with one another and the world around us. It develops in both imaginative and very concrete ways the famous Jewish idea that the dinner table is a *mikdash me'at* - a mini-Temple. Like the Temple service, the table's purpose is to help people have a relationship with each other and with that which is holy.

And then he mentions the remarkable custom of some sages and innkeepers from Provence who would turn their dinner tables into the coffins in which they were buried. They did this in order to symbolically take their acts of hospitality while they were alive with them when they passed on. Invitations to human guests in effect "invite" God to the dinner table.

Rabbeinu Bahya noted that we take nothing with us from this world except the mitzvahs that we did – especially those we shared with others: the *tzedakah* that we gave and the *goodness* that we demonstrated around our tables. Because long after the food has been cleared away, it is the symbolism of the table that sustains us. The dining room table was a primary focus of *chesed*, kindness to others. It was there where the guests that we invited to our homes would find

sustenance. It was there that the poor were fed. It was there where those who had no family or friends found solace and friendship.

In the Talmud (Berachot 54b) it says that one of the three things that will prolong our days is “ha-ma’arich al shulchanu” – whoever prolongs time at the table, that person’s days and years are prolonged. Because by prolonging one’s time at the table, it is more likely that a poor person will come and we will offer food and they will be provided for. And our days will be prolonged also because we pray and learn and form community at our tables.

In all these ways, the table in the Mishkan is compared to our own tables and, as such, we should always remember that the only things that we own are our deeds, the ways in which we act towards one another, the ways in which we behave in the world.

And so, I wonder if you have memories of a special table that you sat at, and if you can remember who you were with and what made it so special?

Sources

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<http://forward.com/food/135671/making-your-dinner-table-a-temple/>