

Torah Thoughts Terumah

5779:

Great literature functions on multiple levels simultaneously. A great novel will usually be an interesting story, with finely drawn characters and evocative period details. It will also teach us something about the human condition, using its characters to represent larger truths that readers will feel connected to. But not all great literature takes the form of narrative. Religious literature, such as the Torah, incorporates historical elements, legendary tales, legal sections and poetry. This week's parshah, Terumah, goes into tremendous detail about the building of the mishkan, the Israelites' portable sanctuary during the wilderness years.

One reason for the level of detail in these descriptions of the mishkan is practical: They are the 'blueprints' for the building, which the priesthood would need every time they established a new camp on the way from Egypt to Canaan. But on another level, the Torah is using its words to replace a pictorial representation of the mishkan. It is creating a literary equivalent to modern blueprints. By using words – lots of them, with a great deal of detail – the Torah creates a reality of the mishkan for us as readers long after the time of the desert tent, the first or even the second Temple of Jerusalem. Those structures existed until the first century, but the words that describe their first form, the mishkan, are still with us, and we continue to read about them long past the time when any such buildings existed, giving the words even more prominence than the actual things they describe.

Study of texts like this is sometimes said to be dry or dull. While it certainly lacks the momentum of the accounts of the patriarchs or the Exodus from Egypt, the plans for the mishkan have their own kind of interest and importance. They teach us about the importance of the physical institutions of Jewish life, such as the synagogue, that are at the center of our religious and social lives. They also teach us that even when those institutions are physically absent that they remain at the center of our experience. The mishkan and the Jerusalem Temple are gone, but by continually learning about them we connect to our history and to our sacred texts, we learn what it meant to be a Jew to our ancestors and in so doing learn what it might mean for us. By entering the reality of the text, we make up for the absence of the reality of the mishkan itself. We read about it, we imagine it, and we consider our obligations to the synagogue that has taken its place.