

Terumah 5768 – Successful Sanctuaries

By Rabbi Elie Weinstock

The Torah devotes one chapter to its account of the creation of the universe, three chapters to its description of the revelation at Mount Sinai, and eleven chapters to the story of the Exodus. In contrast, no less than thirteen chapters are devoted to the making of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). It is obvious that there is a lesson here for the ages. It is a little less obvious what that contemporary lesson might be. After all, we do not, individually, have an obligation to build our own *Mishkan*, nor do we have a mandate as a community to build a new *Mikdash* (Temple). There is clearly a lot of symbolism in the construction of the *Mishkan*. Each of the vessels, and all of the materials used, inspire different emotions and remind us of different components of our relationship with God. The verse, “*V’asu li mikdash, v’shachanti b’tocham* – And they shall make for Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell within their midst,” however, is a clarion call for bringing God’s presence into our midst. So just what is expected of us?

The *Ramban* (Nachmanides) compares the different components of the Tabernacle with the different components of the revelation at Mount Sinai. What is the point of such a comparison? The *Ramban* explains it by stating that the experience of constructing and worshipping in the

Tabernacle would serve to bring back the experience of the revelation at Sinai long after the event.

Since the revelation at Sinai was, by its nature, such a unique event, why should we wish to duplicate it? Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschutz (1690-1764, rabbi of Prague and Altona) provides a remarkable answer: The acceptance of the Torah by the Jews at Sinai was not total. Complete acceptance only came about by means of the service in the Tabernacle.

At Sinai, the heavens opened for the greatest sound and light show on Earth, leaving a nation mesmerized and awe-inspired. But the Jews were passive recipients of this unique, never-to-be-repeated gift from above. They had everything handed to them on a silver platter.

To create something more lasting and permanent took a building campaign. Men and women, young and old, everybody rolled up their sleeves. It took weeks and months of hard labor, meaningful contributions by every individual, planning and programming, designing and then actually building a holy house for God. **We** made it happen. And, thereby, it was the people who, through their own efforts, brought God down to earth.

True revelation is rare. While there certainly are those special, once-in-a-lifetime moments when we witness the unmistakable presence of God in our lives, we cannot wait for lightning to strike. It is necessary for us to create the infrastructure, to take the building blocks in our hands and “*Make Me a Sanctuary.*” We need to build to bring God into our communities.

This situation is most striking in the case of a synagogue, the modern day descendant of the *Mishkan* and *Mikdash*. The prophet Yechezkel (Ezekiel 11:16), in trying to comfort the exiled Jews, quotes God’s message, “*V’ehi lahem l’mikdash me’at ba-aratzot asher ba’u sham* – And I will be a miniature sanctuary for the Jews in all the lands that they will be.” The Talmud (Megilah 29a) explains that the *mikdash me’at* refers to the synagogues to be found in the Diaspora. Very much in the spirit of the *Mishkan*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes the synagogue as an example of tremendous initiative taken by the Jewish people. He writes:

It came into being not through words spoken by God to Israel, but by words spoken by Israel to God. There is no synagogue in *Tanakh* (Bible), no command to build local houses of prayer. To the contrary, insofar as the Torah speaks of a ‘house of God’ it refers to a central sanctuary, a collective focus for the worship of the people as a whole.

In an age where many are trying to reform or reinvigorate the classic model of synagogue, we tend to forget how profound the traditional concept

of a synagogue is. As one Israeli historian (Professor M. Stern) noted, “In establishing the synagogue, Judaism created one of the greatest revolutions in the history of religion and society, for the synagogue was an entirely new environment for divine service, of a type unknown anywhere before.” It is the *shul* which is the foundation of the community. It is the synagogue that is a sanctuary and a stronghold for Jewish continuity. Besides the external or cosmetic features like a beautiful building and a tasty kiddush (which also have value) the synagogue is THE PLACE where a Jew can be actively and comfortably Jewish.

The synagogue complements the home and supplements the school, and a sanctuary is actually a necessary component. Suppose, in a small town somewhere, a group of ten Jewish men organize a weekly *minyan* (quorum), meeting each Shabbat in a different member’s living room. Now, there is no doubt that this is a beautiful concept. Yet as a long term solution there is something missing. That something is a building dedicated to prayer, a synagogue. In the commentaries on *Shulchan Aruch* (Code of Jewish Law), there is even a doubt expressed whether one can pray permanently in a *shul* which the community rents but does not own. A synagogue needs a sanctuary.

In the Torah's 13 chapters of Sanctuary instructions, there is ample material for good advice in the construction and implementation of our *mikdash me'at*. There are at least three unique and noteworthy hints to the successful synagogue and sanctuary that stand out:

1. To emulate the original *Mishkan* and *Mikdash*, our sanctuaries must contain the essential characteristic which bestowed holiness upon them: the Torah.

“*V'noadi lecha sham v'dibarti itcha mei'al ha-kaporet* – And I shall make My presence known to you there and speak to you from above the Ark's cover...” (Exodus 25:22) Through this declaration Hashem identified the *Mishkan* and its successor structures as a place for God to speak to the Jewish people. The holiness of the sanctuary comes from the Torah. Originally, it was the *aron*, the Holy Ark. Subsequently, the holiness is to be found within the Torah. The Talmud discusses whether the Temple Mount is still holy even after the destruction of the Second Temple. It is a complex issue with reasoned arguments on either side. A major reason for the holiness to remain in existence is because of the fact that even though the Ark is gone, its very presence sanctified the mount. What can be so holy that its effects linger on? Only the holy Torah.

I once gave a prayer workshop to third and fourth graders at a community day school. It was a Thursday, so part of my talk was on the Torah reading as part of our weekday service in addition to Shabbat. In the course of our discussion, one of the girls raised her hand and said, “I get it. When we pray, we talk to God. When we read the Torah, God talks to us.” I couldn’t have said it any better myself.

A successful sanctuary needs Torah. Not just lots of Torah scrolls or even numerous class offerings. It needs a commitment to and passion for Torah study. It can be Hebrew or Talmud or Prayer or *Parsha* (Torah portion study), but a synagogue is not a *mikdash me’at* without those who attend it, embracing - and studying - the Torah which sanctifies the sanctuary in the first place.

2. The synagogue is also a place to gather and be inspired. We need only look to the *shoresh*, root, of the word *beit ha-k’neset – kns-* for guidance. The word means to gather together. As we are now in the first month of Adar, Purim can’t be too far away. And it is in the Book of Esther where we see one of the key ingredients to an effective synagogue. “*Leich k’nos et kol ha-yehudim – Go and assemble all of the Jews...*” (4:16) Esther commands Mordechai to gather the Jews together. It was not just to gather to

pray or fast. *K'nos* was a command to assemble and take action. A *beit ha-k'neset* is a place to assemble to study and pray, but it must also be a place where people assemble to take action. It is a place for daily, Shabbat, and festival services as well as a place for blood drives, UJA and AIPAC initiatives, food pantries and toy and book drives. A successful synagogue must serve as a meeting place for community agencies who serve important constituencies – from Community Boards to self-help groups to senior citizen initiatives and *Bikur Cholim* (visiting the sick). These are the characteristics of a true *beit ha-k'neset*, and it is such a strategy that transforms *shuls* and synagogues into places worthy to be called *mikdash me'at*.

3. The synagogue must inspire those who assemble inside to greater learning, knowledge, action, and commitment, but to do all of this requires a commitment to something much more fundamental. A *beit ha-k'neset* must be a *kenisah* – a welcoming portal or doorway to all those who seek to enter. A successful sanctuary must not only offer the requisite services and classes to educate, activate, and inspire; it must also bring people through the door. We read today of the *petach* (entryway) to the Mishkan. That *petach* must be wide enough and diverse enough to see the value in all people and encourage and enable them to find their way to Judaism. It is not enough to leave the

door open with a sign on the sidewalk boards or in the community calendar of all that people can take advantage of – whether they are members or not. We must go out and proactively bring the people to us. The synagogue is INCOMPLETE without such an effort, and we learn this, too, from the *Mishkan*.

“*V’orot eilim me’adamim v’orot techashim va-atzei shitim* – Red-dyed ram skins, *tachash* skins, and acacia wood” (Exodus 25:5) were among the materials collected for the *Mishkan*. What is the *tachash*? Some refer to a comment in Yechezkel that Hashem made us shoes of *tachash* leather in the desert. The Targum Onkelos (Aramic commentary of the Torah) defines it as “*sasgona*,” which the Talmud (Shabbat 28a) tells us is an animal that rejoices (*sas*) in its many colors (*gona*).

Why must the animal used be one that rejoices in his colors? The *sasgona* is not only a single creature of diverse colors; it takes joy in its diversity. This was a key ingredient to building the *Mishkan* and is just as essential in constructing a complete *mikdash me’at*. We shouldn’t merely *tolerate* Jews of other stripes, we should *rejoice* in their existence. As one blogger put it on the internet, Judaism “is stronger because we have Modern Orthodox Jews who take their Judaism to the streets, *Yeshivish* ones who are constantly raising the bar on the standards of Torah study...the Zionists who

secured for us a homeland...we need multiple expressions.” A successful synagogue and sanctuary welcomes and actively recruits all types of Jews to learn and be inspired.

The *Mishkan* was the template for subsequent efforts to create a place for God in this world. It was, and is, an extension of the revelation at Sinai as we reveal how God continues to be imminent in our lives. The *mikdash me'at* has appropriately taken on the mantle of Tabernacle and Temple, but to be a truly successful synagogue requires the construction and maintenance of a place where Jews gather to study Torah, pray, and be inspired to actions. Furthermore, it must be a place that proactively welcomes all Jews to share the sanctuary experience while celebrating the diversity of the Jewish community. When we enable all Jews to come together for these lofty and noble goals of *lilmod u'lelameid, lishmor v'la'asot, u'lekayeim* – to study and learn, to observe and act, and to enable all Jews to join us for these endeavors, we will certainly merit the blessing of *v'shachanti b'tocham* – of God dwelling within our midst.