

THE TEMPLE IS NOT HOLY

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Our history, both as an historic people and as a contemporary community, repeatedly reveals spiritual confusion when we build temples of brick and mortar. The commonplace experience is that we lose sight of the fact that *kirvat Adonai*, closeness to God, is not to be gained in any physical sense: We forget that there is no special place where God is more tangibly proximate. We forget that closeness to God is a spiritual phenomenon that comes about by hearing and heeding the Torah in our day-to-day lives.

So the *raison d'être* of the Temple is not that it has the power to bring God nearer to us—changing God; but that it is a means to bring our own will nearer to God—changing ourselves. The purpose of the Temple is to enable us to discipline ourselves *together* as a people and a community with one will, to build a spiritually moral and materially fulfilling society, one whose hallmarks are compassion and justice.

We do this, becoming unified as one, by surrendering our will to God and Torah, which frees us from slavish devotion to social and individual materialism and sensuality and their consequences. Giving up our will to God and Torah fills us with a satisfying consciousness of our power to avoid that which is deathly and dead in favor of that which is alive and life-giving.

But *how* is the Temple to do this—either in the Sinai wilderness, in ancient Israel, or in our contemporary community?

We can begin to find answers to this question in the Torah reading *Pekudei*, which opens with the phrase: *אלה פקודי המשכן* (Exodus 35:21)—“These are the *pekudei* of the Mishkan” (i.e., the Tabernacle).

But what, exactly, does *pekudei* mean?

It refers to virtually everything that belongs to the Mishkan, about which we can learn much from the Torah commentary of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888). The entire list is too long to consider here in detail, but some of the main “furnishings” and contents include: The *Kodesh Kodashim* (קדש קדשים) or Holy of Holies, in which is found the Aron (ארון) or Ark containing the *Eidut* (עדות) or Testimony; the *Shulchan* (שולחן) or Table, with the loaves of bread; the *Menorah* (מנורה) or Lamp; the *Mizbeiach Nechoshet* (מזבח נחשת) or Copper (sacrificial) Altar; and the *Mizbeiach Zahav* (מזבח הזהב) or Golden (incense) Altar.

The Mishkan with all its furnishings and contents was created entirely out of the voluntary sacrifices of the people. Non-contributing members forfeited their right to exist as Jews; in effect, one

who failed to contribute to the community lost the right to be counted as one of the Israelite people.

Withal, the total spent on the Mishkan didn't even begin to approach the national treasure spent on the later Temples—yet those Temples, for all their grandeur, didn't approach the spiritual heights of the Mishkan. Only in the simple *Ohel Moeid*, the tent of meeting with God, was the *Shechinah*, as God's palpable presence on earth, visible as the Cloud of Glory.

What is the purpose of the Sanctuary?

It's certainly not meant to be a place of escape from earthly human conditions; instead it contains the means to uplift those conditions. It's erected as a home for the Torah, which is to govern and thereby enhance all social life. The Sanctuary is the place in which we offer *ourselves* up to God and Torah through the offerings we bring. The offerings are not intended to be personal expressions of our thoughts and feelings; instead they represent the Sanctuary's demands on us as a condition of *kirvat Adonai*, getting near to God. The Sanctuary is thus a model for all public and private activity, and in that sense it's a place of learning and personal transformation.

How does that learning take place?

The Sanctuary itself does not bring God's grace, but its design demonstrates to the people what is necessary to make the *Shechinah* present. The presence of the *Shechinah* is experienced in the blossoming of communal and national life. Thus the purpose of the Sanctuary is to provide a continuous spiritual education so that the people become an Aron for the Torah, which is the means to that blossoming.

What are the tools and the methods?

Let's take a guided tour of the Sanctuary: The *Kodesh Kodashim* is in the rear to the west, with the Aron containing the *Luchot* (לוחות), the Tablets of the Testimony, and a copy of the Torah compiled by Moses—the Law. The *Kodesh Kodashim* is the *source* of all holiness. Not because of some “Raiders of the Lost Ark” magic, but because the essence of holiness is that someone or something has been dedicated and consecrated to the special purpose of striving upwards to God and Torah.

In front of the *Kodesh Kodashim* are the *Menorah* on the south side and the *Shulchan* on the north side, symbolizing the enlightened mind and material well-being, respectively.

The *Menorah* represents the spirit of knowing and serving God to build up the world: It symbolizes a golden tree of knowledge, a unity of spiritual perfection and completion, the light signifying our

God-given spirit of understanding and doing. The central stem symbolizes that there is a common source and purpose for our knowledge and action. Maintaining the lights signifies our need to derive clarity from the Torah. And the lights burn from evening until morning to enable the study of Torah, which is the essential foundation for action.

The Shulchan represents the idea that when Torah guides our focused industriousness, the result is not only spiritual meaning, but also material satisfaction and comfort. The Table is belted by a pure golden band, which teaches us that our materialism is to be restrained by holy purpose. Our material life is not to be guided exclusively by our selfish sensual appetites, but to be placed before God's judgment. The loaves on the table represent communal brotherhood, cooperation and caring as the fundamental conditions for our material survival and success—not cutthroat competition but unselfish sharing with others is the means.

The Mizbeiach Zahav is located between the Menorah and the Shulchan, opposite the Aron. It represents the union of spiritual and material life, earthly existence permeated by spirituality. What it directs as a practical matter is the complete sublimation of the selfish self of material acquisitiveness to God and godly purposes.

The Mizbeiach Nechoshet is used to raise human deeds up to God. The Altar represents Hareil (הר אל), the Mount of God; it is in fact called Har Sinai (הר סיני), Mount Sinai. The square form of the Altar (רבע) is a reminder to dedicate ourselves to free-willed morality, so that we are to be nothing like the nature cults. The lesson of the elevating offerings made on the Altar is that we are to overcome our physical appetites and live by the ideals of the Torah. We are to be elevated up to God by our own spiritual moral efforts.

The offering symbolizes commitment to giving up the life of an animal lived solely to preserve oneself and, instead, to live for one another through Torah. Different sacrificial animals express different intentions, depending on the particular form of atonement that one requires. A cow, for instance, represents commitment to duty, to be a *consistent* worker in God's fields; a sheep represents a commitment to *submit* oneself, to be a loyal member of God's flock. The purpose of the sacrifice is to free

oneself of the animal within, to liberate oneself from the blind forces of nature. The sacrificial animal only symbolizes offering oneself up to God, to motivate oneself to return to Torah rather than remain enslaved to uncontrolled sensuality. The sacrifice is not thought to have any effect on God.

So when we put these furnishings and contents together, what do we have?

At the heart is the "Place of the Word," the Ark, in the Holy of Holies that receives the Torah as the Law of God—Torah (תורה) from the root ה-ר-ה, meaning the seed of life—which is the source of all holiness. Then we have the symbols of spiritual and material development that flow from the Torah: It is the Torah, the Tree of Life of the mind and spirit that is represented in the Menorah. It is the Torah that brings to us spiritually fulfilling material well-being, which is represented by the Table with its loaves. The Golden Altar is a reminder to make no artificial boundaries between spiritual and material life. The Copper Altar is there as the vehicle of practical commitment to strive upwards to God in daily life. And on the east side, the entrance, always open for the nation to be refined and strengthened spiritually and materially by the Word.

What are some of the lessons of building temples of bricks and mortar?

The Temple and the day-to-day life of the community and the nation are not to be separate spheres but entirely integrated, paid for by the people. The Temple is to be the seat of learning—not a sanctuary in the sense of escape but a seminary that prepares us to strive upwards to God.

The work of building the Sanctuary is so holy that it's not called *melacha*, the usual Hebrew word for work, but *avodah*, the word for holy service. Yet even the work of building the Sanctuary is to cease on Shabbat. And the 39 basic categories of work that are forbidden on Shabbat are those that are required to build the Sanctuary.

From all this we learn that the Temple is not holy in itself. It's only a way to holiness, a teaching guide that we pay for and sanctify by dedicating and consecrating ourselves to the sole source of holiness—the Torah.

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