

With Parashat Terumah, we begin the Parashot that deal with the construction of the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary in the desert. These Torah readings are generally regarded as the least interesting of all the Parashot. I will endeavor to excite some interest.

Let us begin with the subject of donations. You will recall that last Shabbat, we read a special maftir (Ex 30:11-16) which outlined a poll tax of a half shekel due from each male citizen above the age of 20 years. The tax was to support the communal sanctuary. The operative words were, "The rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less." This democratic tax supported the Mishkan. We read it last week to remind us that Passover is coming and in Temple times, that meant that we were obliged to pay for the upkeep of the Temple before this biggest of the pilgrimage festivals.

In Parashat Terumah, we read of God's commandment to Moshe to tell the B'nai Yisroel, "Command the Israelite people to bring giftsfrom every person whose heart so moves him." (Ex 25: 2).

So the poll tax can be seen as membership dues and the terumah seen as a capital campaign. Doesn't this sound very modern?

Now I would like to turn to the Mishkan which is discussed in detail in today's parasha. Its construction is contrasted with the construction of Solomon's temple (958BCE) described in the Haftarah. These are two important versions of Sacred Space in Jewish history. Closer inquiry will reveal striking differences beyond a portable vs. a permanent sanctuary.

The Miskan is described for us as a highly popular project. Its construction was a cooperative venture by all strata of society. The men worked, the women weaved (wove), and the artisans fashioned special ritual items and objects. The project rested on the above-mentioned call for community support and contributions. This proved so successful that Moshe had to ask the people to stop giving.

But the Temple was not built by the people, but rather by foreign skilled labor, based on Solomon's connections and arrangements with King Hiram of Tyre. What's more, Solomon raised a levy, a special tax on the Israelite people, consisting of being pressed into forced labor.

How can we explain the differences? Here I have help from Rabbi Norman Lamm from Yeshiva U. He says that the operative word for Solomon was "chochma"= wisdom. The first verse of our Haftarah states, "

“God gave wisdom to Solomon.” But with Moshe, God had a unique experience of divine revelation. Moshe was the instrument of God’s revelation to the Jewish people. And the Torah seems more explicit about the Miskan really serving as God’s dwelling place among the B’nai Yisroel. Rabbi Lamm describes Moshe as full of KAVOD, a sense of divine grandeur, from which all norms of human moral conduct and ethical behavior as well as religious ecstasy and mystic communion derive.

But to be fair, in order to build the Miskan, we needed CHOCHMA as well as KAVOD. I am speaking of the skill of Betzalel and the other divinely inspired artisans. Also, the Temple certainly emanated its share of divine KAVOD and became truly the central focus of Jewish worship until its destruction in 586 BCE.

I think these two principles, CHOCHMA and KAVOD, need to be integrated into our lives, just like they were in evidence in our central places of worship in the past.

Shabbat shalom!

Sid Kadish
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