

Illuminating Man's Inner World

THROUGH THE LENS OF THE PARSHA

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Parshas Tetzaveh: Nice Building, but ‘Where’s the Beef’?

While for many the sections of the Torah that they are most drawn to are the narrative portions of Breishis, the beginning of Shmos and much of sefer Bamidbar, I have for many years found greatest resonance in the parshiyos that describe the mishkan and korbanos. In as much as man is conceived as a miniature mishkan, the building of the sanctuary and the service within, is G-d's blueprint for the nature and make-up of man and his purpose in the universe. As such every piece of the mishkan - the instruction to build, the building itself and the avodah within its walls - all carry deep meaning, instruction, and symbolism.

Nowhere is this truism more apparent than at the end of parshas Tetzaveh. Most of the meforshim comment on the placement in the Torah of the commandment to build the mizbeiach hazahav (also known as the mizbeiach haketores), the alter upon which the ketores was offered. The instructions to build the vessels of the mishkan are all found in parshas Terumah while Tetzaveh is dedicated towards the description of the bigdei kehuna. Why then stick the placement of the mizbeiach hazahav here at the end of Tetzaveh? Clearly there is something significant going on.

Many of the answers provided run to the more technical and speak of the unique halakhic nature of this mizbeiach as opposed to the other keilim. The Ramban, Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh and many others all take the issue in that direction. However, the Seforno writes the following:

ולא הזכר זה המזבח עם שאר הכלים בפרשת תרומה,
כי לא היתה הכונה בו להשכין האל יתברך בתוכנו, כמו

שהיה הענין בשאר הכלים, כאמרו ושכנתי בתוכם, ככל אשר אני מראה אותך את תבנית המשכן ואת תבנית כל כליו.... אבל היה ענין זה המזבח לכבוד את האל יתברך אחרי בואו לקבל ברצון עבודת עמו בקרבנות הבקר והערב, ולשחר פניו במנחת קטרת, על דרך הבו לה' כבוד שמו, שאו מנחה ובאו לפניו:

The purpose of the mizbeiach was not to being the shechinah into the mishkan like the other keilim. The theme of Terumah is the ושכנתי בתוכם - ‘build it and I shall come’. That is not what the mizbeiach haketores is about. This mizbeiach is to offer the ketores which serves as a sign of honor to HKB’H who has graciously ‘received’ our offerings. Because says the Seforno that the whole purpose of this mishkan is completely unique it stands to reason this its placement in the Chumash stands apart from the other vessels.

This Seforno that points to the unique role of the incense put me on a certain track in thinking about this issue. Very simply this is what strikes me.

Man builds this majestic structure. It is grandiose in scale and in both its beauty and its precision. Every piece of it reflects the binas haleiv and the chochmas elyon that is man's great hallmark. There existed a genuine enthusiasm among the leaders, the builders, and the contributors to create a space that would be a fitting abode for HKB’H's presence.

There is only one potential problem. We have all seen this same narrative played out throughout history and in our own lives and those of you reading this right now might even be slightly nodding your head in acknowledgment. We have

all seen majestic homes built and erected all for the most noble and elevated of purposes only to watch the home become a place that ceases to be an expression of its original aims and goals. We have all witnessed magnificent shuls built, with all of the concomitant speeches about the creation of a mikdash me'at only to witness the same shul devolve into a place of conflict and a makom that ceases to carry the banner for its original noble mission. The history of the batei mikdashot themselves speak to this sad reality.

The placement of the mizbeiach hazahav at the end of the joint parshiyos of Terumah and Tetzaveh would seem to be saying the following. You have built a beautiful structure. You have graciously and magnanimously offered your most valuable possessions in the building of this structure. You will adorn the Kohanim in absolute beauty. Every piece of the structure speaks of majesty and of complete perfection.

The only question is what will be the spirit within the majestic structure? Will the essence of this makom speak to the greatness, fineness and essential sanctity of man or will it be a place to 'just' follow the technical rules of the avodah and nothing more? In short will the mishkan be infused with the spirit of the reiach nicho'ach, the pleasant aroma, of the ketores or will it be something tragically less? Perhaps HKB'H commands the building of the mizbeiach haketores at the very end of these parshiyos to remind everyone involved in this enterprise to not lose sight of the reiach nichoach and to caution us as to how easy it is to get lost in the structure itself and to lose the appropriate spirit within that structure.

I have long appreciated my nearly 30 years in Yeshiva University and my relationship with and exposure to the Rebbeim of the Yeshiva. The thousands of exceptional talmidim who have passed through the doors of the beis medrash have ingested the values of the Roshei Yeshiva. What I have seen in my years there (and this would undoubtedly be true about all anashim

gedolim) is that there is such a thing called a Religious Personality. This is something that is emphasized by the Ramban on a number of occasions and is alluded to in many of the teshuvos of the Niddah B'Yehudah and Rav Moshe Feinstein. One can build a beautiful structure - mitzvos, hakpada about zman, learning etc.- and still not reflect the beauty of the Torah and not be a person who conveys the necessary spirit of darchei noam.

In many ways it is easy to build a building. It is 'easy' to keep halakha. What is more nuanced and requires far more work is the continuous question of whether I have cultivated a spirit of reiach nichoach within that structure? Do I have a refined, generous, gentle and humble religious personality within the confines of the structure of my religious life? It is often all of the subtle areas in between the actions that speak to this life of reiach nichoach.

To speak plainly, the cultivation of this religious personality which speaks of the reiach nichoach in our lives within the structure of our lives requires enormous thoughtfulness, self-awareness, work, and commitment. While perhaps the work to create that personality is daunting, at the end of the day it is all the difference between a building and a Mikdash, a structure and a Beis Elokim and just living a 'frum' life and living with the goals of being in some way an ish Elokim. While the mishkan is long gone, its eternal messages are fully alive and fully relevant to this day.

Have a good Shabbos and a Chag sameach

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