

Illuminating Man's Inner World

THROUGH THE LENS OF THE PARSHA

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Parshas Terumah – The Big Picture is not the Whole Picture

One of the overriding messages of the Torah is the obligation to be sensitive to language. While perhaps subtle, we understand that the usage of one word versus another, or even a different conjugation of the same word changes the complete underlying meaning of the concept at hand. A case in point from contemporary parlance. Someone who only tells their spouse and children ‘Love you’ versus ‘I love you’ has taken a very personal and meaningful statement and in a way depersonalized it and shows a discomfort with deep and genuine feelings. It is only a small little ‘I’, but it is a single letter that fundamentally reflects on the character of the person in the relationship and changes the dynamic of the relationship itself.

One of the most prominent examples of a change in language that helps paint a far deeper and richer tapestry appears at the beginning of Parshas Terumah. After commanding Moshe to collect the materials with which to build the mishkan, HKB’H instructs:

וַיִּשְׂאוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשִׁכְנִתִּי בְּתוֹכָם:

And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.

Many of the meforshim note that perhaps the word בתוכו -in it - I.e that I will reside in the mishkan - would have been more appropriate. Instead בתוכם conveys a far richer image. Namely that the mishkan would be the vehicle that would allow G-d’s presence to reside in the midst of the Jewish people in a way that had not been true up until this point. The existence of the mishkan, the beis hamikdash and to some extent a shul serves as a conduit for the intensified presence of HKB’H in the world and provides an opportunity to experience that presence.

But beyond the beautiful but generalized statement of ‘b’socham’ - in their midst - many of the Kabbalistic and early Hasidic figures deepen the statement. Namely that what is being conveyed is בתוך כל אחד ואחד - G-d’s presence will be manifest in the midst of each and every person. The Alshich and Rav Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye in the Toldos Yaakov Yosef see in this instruction the mandate that each person should perceive themselves

as a miniature sanctuary and they proceed to correlate all of the various facets of the mishkan with man’s attributes and makeup.

Without overstating it, the switch from בתוכו to בתוכם with the additional וְאֶחָד וְאֶחָד כָּל stands as one of the single most significant formulations as to who man is and what he is aspiring to be in this world.

The following thought struck me this week. Why at the very onset of the hundreds of pesukim that mandate and describe the building of the mishkan is HKB’H bringing attention to this component of בתוך כל אחד ואחד? Why not first detail what needs to be built and then upon the conclusion of either the instruction or of the actual building HKB’H can inform Moshe and the Jewish people that the mishkan will be the opportunity for residence among the nation as a whole and within the hearts and souls of each member of the nation. Why now?

The simple answer is that at the beginning of any enterprise you clearly lay out and formulate the exact purpose and goals of the task at hand. At the beginning of the building of the mishkan, Moshe, and by extension Am Yisroel needed to understand what they were contributing towards and what the presence of the mishkan sought to accomplish.

There is in my mind another element at work as well. Anytime there has been a shift from the individual to the institution there is a fundamental danger that somehow the broad aims of the institution can eradicate the recognition of the individual with all of his/ her specific needs and beauty. The birth of a nation, the building of a country, the establishment of a shul/ community, the transition from a few people learning to a Yeshiva or a higher place of learning, and yes, the transition from personal avodah to the centralized mishkan, all require some degree of broad institutionalization and the transition from the focus on the individual to the focus on the structure.

Inherent in that shift of course is a grave danger and

exist the seeds for the type of organizational and communal breakdowns that we have seen from that time and forward. As such at the very beginning of this incredibly meaningful and necessary venture of building the mishkan, HKB'H clearly and unequivocally states - בתוכם/ בתוך כל אחד ואחד. It is a way of saying 'do not forget what this is about, do not forget that every structure and institution is about individualistic man establishing a deep relationship with Me as a personal G-d'.

Moshe's desire to personally adjudicate each case that came to him until his father-in-law intervened as well as his insistence on counting each person himself all speak of the same theme. It speaks of the fundamentally democratic essence of yahadus in which each person should be made to feel as significant as any other person, no matter their lineage or their socio-economic status. While the statement of the heads of the tribes during the building of the mishkan that encouraged everyone to bring their goods for the building of the sanctuary and then they will contribute whatever still needs to be brought sounds noble in theory, it served as a violation of this principle. It placed the nesi'im separate and away from the people. Organizations and institutions can easily create and emphasize those hierarchy's, and as such the Torah from the very onset tried to fight against the perceived class system that comes with institutionalization. The focus always needs to be on the yachid and the abundantly clear statement of the absolute significance of the yachid, any yachid and every yachid, in the structure of the organization.

Perhaps it is this that the Mishna emphasizes in meseches Sanhedrin. In the structure of the Sanhedrin or Beis Din one might become more broadly focused on the judiciary as an institution and on the law as the code by which the community functions. In this context the da'yanim are reminded and in turn remind and emphasize to the witnesses that each man is considered to be his or her own world and the saving or destruction of the individual is comparable to the saving or destruction of the entire universe. Never allow any element of Yahadus (shuls, schools, courts etc.), even with Judaism's communal focus, on becoming a movement that places principles and the institution over the dogma of בתוך כל אחד ואחד.

Undoubtedly this is not always easy to do. To be honest, early on in my tenure in a previous position, someone took me aside at the kiddush (where all the really juicy stuff tends to take place) and told me that 'Rabbi, you

need to know who the people are that you really need to cater to and make sure that their needs are being met'. I understood what he was saying. A shul or institution can only function because of the largesse of specific individuals and it behooves the head of the institution to make sure that those people feel attended to. I understand the sentiments, but also feel uncomfortable with them. Each person is their own שר התורה (prince of Torah). Every person stood equidistant from Har Sinai. Almost the very first words in the instruction of the mishkan serves as a reminder of exactly that. Do not allow the institutionalization of Judaism to obfuscate or erode the essence of Judaism.

While there is much more to be said on this topic I do want to end with a point of emphasis. This week we will be witnessing the 500,000th casualty in this country alone due to Covid. In a way even a pandemic can become politicized and institutionalized. Who gets the vaccine, should one take the vaccine, debates over government shutdowns, fights over masks, I should I get tested or not etc. Both the enormity of the actual numbers as well as the political issues around the pandemic eventually take center stage. The institution and pandemic as an entity dominates our relationship to it.

Of course, that is beyond chaval. There are actual people in the millions who are suffering from either disease, death, loneliness, depression, impoverishment, family tensions and the like. Can we hold them in our consciousness? Can we feel deeply, empathetically, and fully for the enormity of loss that exists not in headlines but בתוך כל אחד ואחד? In a way it is the mark of a certain personal greatness and nobility of spirit. To be people who live on two planes simultaneously. *Ishei klal*- broad, communal, dedicated to the 'mishkan' and committed to the structures that the world and the community require. While very much being able to exist as *ishei prat* - living with deep feeling for the joys and the losses of each individual who themselves represent an entire mikdash and an entire universe. This dual life and focus is far from simple but I believe that the duality encapsulates HKB'H's desire for having a sanctuary for his presence in the world in the first place. Thousands of years later we should continue to be inspired and informed by the beauty and responsibility of these simple words - ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם.

Have a beautiful Shabbos

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