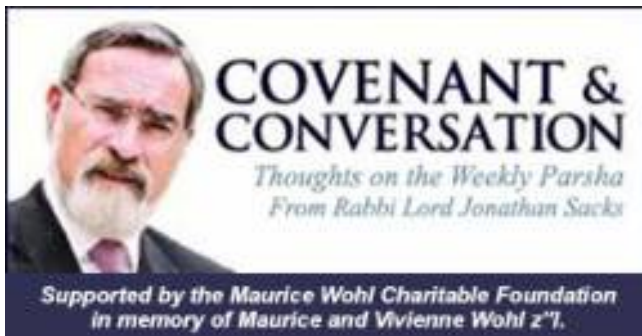


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## The Home We Build Together

The sequence of parashot that begins with *Terumah*, and continues *Tetzaveh*, *Ki Tissa*, *Vayakhel* and *Pekudei*, is puzzling in many ways. First, it outlines the construction of the Tabernacle (Mishkan), the portable House of Worship the Israelites built and carried with them through the desert, in exhaustive and exhausting detail. The narrative takes almost the whole of the last third of the book of Exodus. Why so long? Why such detail? The Tabernacle was, after all, only a temporary home for the Divine Presence,

eventually superseded by the Temple in Jerusalem.

Besides which, why is the making of the Mishkan in the book of Exodus at all? Its natural place seems to be in the book of Vayikra, which is overwhelmingly devoted to an account of the service of the Mishkan and the sacrifices that were offered there. The book of Exodus, by contrast, could be subtitled, “the birth of a nation”. It is about the transition of the Israelites from a family to a people and their journey from slavery to freedom. It rises to a climax with the covenant made between God and the people at Mount Sinai. What has the Tabernacle to do with this? It seems an odd way to end the book.

The answer, it seems to me, is profound. First, recall the history of the Israelites until now. It has been a long series of complaints. They complained when the first intervention by Moses made their situation worse. Then, at the Red Sea, they said to Moses: “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!” (Ex. 14:11-12).

After crossing the sea they continued to complain, first about the lack of water, then that the water was bitter, then at the lack of food, then again about the lack of water. Then, within weeks of the revelation at Sinai – the only time in history God appeared to an entire nation – they made a Golden Calf. If an unprecedented sequence of miracles

cannot bring about a mature response on the part of the people, what will?

It is then that God said: *Let them build something together*. This simple command transformed the Israelites. During the whole construction of the Tabernacle there were no complaints. The entire people contributed - some gold, silver, or bronze, some brought skins and drapes, others gave their time and skill. They gave so much that Moses had to order them to stop. A remarkable proposition is being framed here: *It is not what God does for us that transforms us. It is what we do for God*.

So long as every crisis was dealt with by Moses and miracles, the Israelites remained in a state of dependency. Their default response was to complain. In order for them to reach adulthood and responsibility, there had to be a transition from passive recipients of God's blessings to active creators. The people had to become God's "partners in the work of creation" (Shabbat 10a). That, I believe, is what the Sages meant when they said, "Call them not 'your children' but 'your builders'" (Brachot 64a). People have to become builders if they are to grow from childhood to adulthood.

Judaism is God's call to responsibility. He does not want us to rely on miracles. He does not want us to be dependent on others. He wants us to become His partners, recognising that what we have, we have from Him, but what we make of what we have is up to us, our choices and our effort. This is not an easy balance to achieve. It is easy to live a life of dependency. It is equally easy in the opposite direction to slip into the mistake of saying "My power and the strength of my hands

have produced this wealth for me" (Deut. 8:17). The Jewish view of the human condition is that everything we achieve is due to our own efforts, but equally and essentially the result of God's blessing.

The building of the Tabernacle was the first great project the Israelites undertook together. It involved their generosity and skill. It gave them the chance to give back to God a little of what He had given them. It conferred on them the dignity of labour and creative endeavour. It brought to closure their birth as a nation and it symbolised the challenge of the future. The society they were summoned to create in the land of Israel would be one in which everyone would play their part. It was to become – in the phrase I have used as the title of one of my books – "the home we build together."<sup>1</sup>

From this we see that one of the greatest challenges of leadership is to give people the chance to give, to contribute, to participate. That requires self-restraint, *tzimtzum*, on the part of the leader, creating the space for others to lead. As the saying goes: A leader is best when people barely need to acknowledge him. When his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: 'we did it ourselves.'<sup>2</sup>

This brings us to the fundamental distinction in politics between State and Society. The state represents what is *done for us* by the machinery of government, through the instrumentality of laws, courts, taxation and public spending. Society is what *we do for one another* through communities, voluntary associations, charities and welfare organisations. Judaism, I believe, has a

marked preference for society rather than state, precisely because it recognises – and this is the central theme of the book of Exodus – that it is what we do for others, not what others or God does for us, that transforms us. The Jewish formula, I believe, is: small state, big society.

The person who had the deepest insight into the nature of democratic society was Alexis de Tocqueville. Visiting America in the 1830s, he saw that its strength lay in what he called the “art of association”, the tendency of Americans to come together in communities and voluntary groups to help one another, rather than leaving the task to a centralised government. Were it ever to be otherwise, were individuals to depend wholly on the state, then democratic freedom would be at risk.

In one of the most haunting passages of his masterwork, *Democracy in America*, he says that democracies are at risk of a completely new form of oppression for which there is no precedent in the past. It will happen, he says, when people exist solely in and for themselves, leaving the pursuit of the common good to the government. This would then be what life would be like:

Above this race of men stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratifications and to watch over their fate. That power is absolute, minute, regular, provident and mild. It would be like the authority of a parent if, like that authority, its object was to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks, on the contrary, to keep them in perpetual childhood: it is well content that the people should rejoice,

provided they think of nothing but rejoicing. For their happiness such a government willingly labours, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of that happiness; it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property, and subdivides their inheritances: what remains, but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living?<sup>3</sup>

Tocqueville wrote these words almost 200 years ago, and there is a risk that this is happening to some European societies today: all state, no society; all government, little or no community.<sup>4</sup> Tocqueville was not a religious writer. He makes no reference to the Hebrew Bible. But the fear he has is precisely what the book of Exodus documents. When a central power – even when this is God Himself – does everything on behalf of the people, they remain in a state of arrested development. They complain instead of acting. They give way easily to despair. When the leader, in this case Moses, is missing, they do foolish things, none more so than making a Golden Calf.

There is only one solution: to make the people co-architects of their own destiny, to get them to build something together, to shape them into a team and show them that they are not helpless, that they are responsible and capable of collaborative action. Genesis begins with God creating the universe as a home for human beings. Exodus ends with human beings creating the Mishkan, as a ‘home’ for God.

Hence the basic principle of Judaism, that we are called on to become co-creators with God. And hence, too, the corollary: that leaders do not do the work on behalf of the people. They teach people how to do the work themselves. **It is not what God does for us but what we do for God that allows us to reach dignity and responsibility.**



## QUESTIONS (AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE)

1. What are the main themes and messages you have found so far in the book of Shemot?
2. Can you think of new ways that your community could unite to build something together?
3. Making the Golden Calf was also a project that united the people in a creative goal. Why was this so problematic?

## NOTES

1. Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2009).
2. Attributed to Lao-Tsu.
3. Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, abridged and with an introduction by Thomas Bender (The Modern Library, New York, 1981), 584.
4. This is not to imply that there is no role for governments; that all should be left to voluntary associations. Far from it. There are things – from the rule of law to the defence of the realm to the enforcement of ethical standards and the creation of an equitable distribution of the goods necessary for a dignified existence – that only governments can achieve. The issue is balance

## Divine Dialogue

As we ended last week's parashah, Moshe had ascended Mount Sinai in order to receive the Tablets of Testimony - which means that we begin this week's parashah with a simple, technical problem that must be solved: What are we to do with a gift bestowed upon us from Heaven? Where shall we place the Tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were engraved by God's own hand, as it were? The solution to this problem is also provided by God: He commands us to build an ark in which the Tablets will be housed - and a building to house the ark.

They shall make Me a Mikdash (Sanctuary), and I will dwell among them. You must make the Mishkan and all its furnishings following the plan that I am showing you. Make an ark of acacia wood, 2 and a half cubits long, 1 and a half cubits wide, and 1 and a half cubits high... It is in this ark that you will place the Testimony that I will give you.. (Shmot 25:9-16)

We quickly learn that this not merely a solution for a storage problem.

There I will meet with you, and I will impart to you-from above the cover,

from between the two keruvim that are on top of the Ark of the Covenant - all that I will command you concerning the Israelite people. (Shmot 25:22)

The Ark of the Covenant is not designed to merely store an artifact that bears the record of an historic, Divine communication. The Ark and its cover are to serve as a conduit for ongoing communication between man and God, and vice versa.

The relationship between the Revelation at Sinai and the Mishkan is pointed out by Ramban, who highlights the similar language used to describe them. In last week's parashah, the events at Mount Sinai are described as follows:

When Moshe reached the mountain top, the cloud covered the mountain. God's glory rested on Mount Sinai, and it was covered by the cloud for six days. On the seventh day, He called to Moshe from the midst of the cloud. To the Israelites, the appearance of God's glory on the mountain top was like a devouring flame. Moshe went into the cloud, and climbed to the mountain top; and Moshe remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights. (Shmot 24:15-18)

The inauguration of the Mishkan is described in much the same way in the final verses of Shmot:

... Moshe completed all the work. The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and God's glory filled the Mishkan. Moshe could not come into the Tent

of Meeting, since the cloud had rested on it, and God's glory filled the Mishkan. (Shmot 40:33-35)

Ramban goes on to suggest that the linguistic similarity points to a much deeper, more significant thematic connection: The holiness of Sinai, where the Ten Commandments were articulated, was transferred to the Mishkan, where the Ten Commandments were stored - but even this is not the whole story. There is more here than merely the "theory of conservation of holiness." The deeper message is that the Mishkan is the continuation of the Revelation at Sinai; The Revelation was a singular event in human history, but revelation would continue. The Mishkan was created in order to facilitate the ongoing dialogue between God and man; the language that describes its inauguration makes the connection abundantly clear.

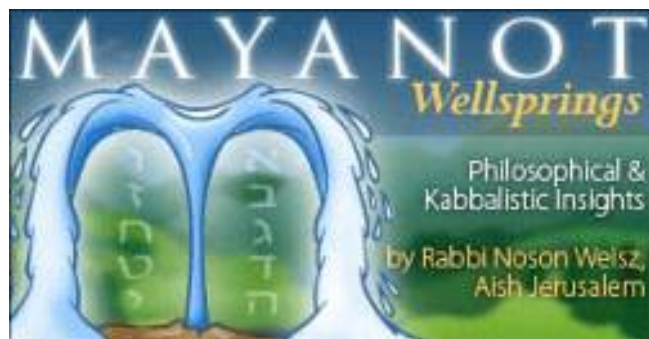
Eventually, when the conquest of the Promised Land was complete, the Mishkan was replaced by the Beit HaMikdash, a permanent, stationary version of the Mishkan, where the High Court (the Sanhedrin) was convened as well:

... the High Court is established in the Mikdash...and the wisest person among (the 71 judges)... stands in the place of Moshe our teacher. (Rambam, Sanhedrin 1:3)

Apparently, the Revelation that began at Sinai never ended. The Tablets that attested to the Revelation were placed in the Ark, but the Voice of God continued to speak to Moshe from Ark. The authority vested in Moshe by virtue of his ability to hear the Divine Voice was passed on,

throughout the generations when the Temple stood, to the leader who stood in Moshe's place - at the head of the High Court, situated in the Beit HaMikdash. Although the moment of revelation at Sinai may have been brief, the holiness of that moment was transferred, first to the Mishkan, and later to the Beit HaMikdash in Jerusalem. The pathway that was opened at Mount Sinai would remain open.

The Mishkan and its later iteration, the Beit Hamikdash, was a place where man could reach up toward God in prayer, sacrifice, and song. But it was also the place where God reached out toward man, a place of meeting where God shared His wisdom and divine teachings with man. May we merit its rebuilding speedily in our days.



## Human Constructions and Constrictions

*"They shall make a sanctuary for Me, so that I may dwell among them. According to what I will show you, after the form of the Tabernacle and the form of all its vessels, and so shall you do." (Exodus 25:8)*

The Talmud comments that the end of the verse -- "*so shall you do*" -- means: "so shall you do through all the generations." (Sanhedrin, 16b)

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, the renowned student of the Gaon of Vilna, is perplexed by this passage of Talmud. If God issued a commandment to build a Tabernacle through all generations, how is it that we make no attempt to carry out this commandment in each generation? And if the explanation is that it is impossible to carry out, then why does God stress the fact that this is a commandment that is applicable to all generations? If He feels that it's important to carry out this commandment here and now, why does God not arrange matters so that it becomes possible?

Rabbi Chaim explains that the answer to the question is offered by the verse itself -- *so that I may dwell among them* -- which literally means within each and every one of them. The commandment to construct a Tabernacle is primarily a personal commandment; every Jew is "a living tabernacle in miniature." God rests the *Shechina*, His Divine Presence, primarily in the human heart.

When the *Shechina* finds a comfortable resting place in the majority of Jewish hearts we have a Tabernacle in the outside world as well. But the *Shechina* that dwells in this Tabernacle is an emanation of the Divine Presence in Jewish hearts. The connection between man and God is not forged by buildings or objects no matter how holy. Such a connection can only originate in the human soul. The human heart of the individual

Jew is the true resting place of the Divine Presence in this world.

The obligation to construct God's Sanctuary throughout the generations stressed by the Talmud can be carried out at any time and in any place, as every individual Jew can make himself a comfortable resting place for the *Shechina*. How is this accomplished?

### **RESTING PLACE FOR THE DIVINE**

Rabbi Chaim explains:

The Zohar compares every Jew to the Temple (i.e. the permanent Tabernacle). Just like the center of the Temple is the Holy of Holies, the center of the human being is his heart. His head is above him, his feet are beneath him, so the heart which is at the midpoint of his trunk, is the actual center of his being. Just as the holiness that is the source of all that is good in the world emanates from the Holy of Holies, the life force of the human emanates from the heart.

The parallels go deeper. The Holy of Holies houses the Ark of the Covenant topped by the two winged cherubim, one of which represents God, while the other represents Israel. The Divine voice heard by man emerges from between these two cherubim.

*When Moses arrived at the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him, he heard the voice speaking to him from atop the cover that was upon the Ark of the Testimony, from between the two cherubim, and He spoke to him.*  
 (Numbers 7:88)

In terms of our human frame of reference, the space in the Holy of Holies above the cherubim belongs to the Divine, while the area beneath is human territory. The point of intersection of the sphere of the human with the dimension of the Divine is located between the cherubim.

The parallel to this focal point in the Temple, which therefore occupies the place of the Ark in the Holy of Holies of the human being, is the portion of the soul known as *ruach* and its physical parallel, the human heart.

### **SOUL ANATOMY**

According to Jewish tradition the human soul has three parts -- *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama*. Each of these spiritual aspects has a physical counterpart in the human body whose assigned function is to serve as the antenna that is perfectly attuned to receiving and translating spiritual signals into the language of physicality.

The brain captures and translates the message of the *neshama* into concepts and ideas. The heart collects the signals of the *ruach* and translates them into character, emotions and speech. The liver is dedicated to the *nefesh* and translates its messages into desires and drives.

The Gaon explains that the *neshama* is above man's level. The *nefesh*, which is akin to the life force in animals, is beneath man. And the *ruach* perfectly represents man's essential spiritual level.

Thus the human heart, which serves as the physical antenna and receiver of the spiritual force of *ruach* is the exact counterpart of the cherubim above the Ark in the Holy of Holies.

Just as that is the point where the Divine voice connects with man, the *ruach* in man's heart is the connection point with the *neshama*, which represents the Divinity within man.

But what does all this have to do with constructing a Tabernacle or Temple? If man is designed this way by God, then he automatically symbolizes the Temple without having to go about constructing it.

## THOUGHTS VS. ACTIONS

In order to comprehend how this construction is a human task despite all the Divinely supplied spiritual equipment, we must understand from a Torah perspective the difference between thoughts and emotions on the one hand and actions on the other hand.

The vast majority of the 613 commandments of the Torah are focused on actions. There are 248 positive commandments requiring us to take positive actions (such as the eating matzah on Passover, or circumcision of the new born on the eighth day, etc.), and there are 365 negative commandments which forbid other forms of action (such as the desecration of the Sabbath, or theft, etc). Very few of the commandments are directed at thoughts or feelings. So heavy an emphasis is placed by the Torah on actions versus thoughts, that the Talmud states the following as Divine policy:

God considers a good thought the equivalent of the completed good deed, as it is written, *then the God fearing spoke to one another, and God listened and heard, and it was recorded before Him in the book of*

*memory of the God-fearing and those who give thought to His name* (Malachi 3:16).

Who are those *who give thought to His name*? Rabbi Asi taught: "Even a person who planned to carry out a positive commandment and was unable to execute his design because of circumstances will be rewarded as though he had actually done it. On the other hand, an evil thought is not given the weight of the deed, [even if it was only the circumstances that rendered its execution impossible], as it is written, *had I perceived iniquity in my heart, God would not have listened.*" (Psalms 66:18) (Talmud, Kidushin 40a)

From the standpoint of reward and punishment only deeds are counted, not thoughts. As a special mark of His goodness, God is willing to assign righteous thoughts the weight of deeds, so that they may be rewarded as well.

Elsewhere, however, the Talmud (Yuma 29a) teaches that the thoughts of sin are worse than the acts of sin themselves. How can these contradictory ideas be reconciled? Is thought more important than action after all?

## SECRET OF CONSTRUCTION

Explains Rabbi Chaim that this question is precisely the correct place to search for the secret of how to construct the human being as a Temple of God.

The link between the *ruach* in the heart and the *neshama* in the mind where the bond with God is



made occurs in the realm of thoughts and feelings, not deeds. If this link is powerful, than the brain, the receiver of the messages of the *neshama*, fills the heart with images of holiness. In turn the heart, the seat of the *ruach*, bursts into flame and is consumed by the feelings of love and fear of God.

The powerful emotions of the heart pass down to the *nefesh* with which it is linked and the liver, the physical counterpart of the *nefesh*, fills the blood that it controls with the life force derived from these emotions. As the blood circulates through the body, all the limbs are inspired with the desire and enthusiasm to carry out God's commandments.

Then, the entire human being is filled with the *Shechina*, Presence of God.

It is due to this fact that the thoughts of sin are worse than the sin itself. If the heart is full of licentious thoughts, or if it is full of the hot fire of rage against one's fellow Jew, or the cold fire of jealousy, the *neshama* cannot connect with it. How can the *neshama*, which represents the *Shechina*, possibly come to rest on such a heart?

## **AN UNHOLY CONNECTION**

In the absence of the linkage between the *neshama* and the *ruach*, the connection between the brain and the heart cannot be a holy one.

Instead, the *neshama* withdraws its signals to the brain as it is forced to break its connection with the *ruach*. The heart receives no holy thoughts or images. Instead of bursting into holy flame, the unholy flame already present in the heart spreads to the brain, and the mind becomes occupied with

planning how best to execute successfully the unholy desires of the heart.

If this is allowed to continue without resistance, the brain will send the instructions for the implementation of these unholy desires to the outer limbs and the result will be the execution in action of the iniquitous desires that originated in the heart. The entire human being houses the illicit desires of the human heart as its spiritual force.

The human heart is thus the focal point of the holiness of the human being. The construction of the human Temple involves learning to control negative desires. When the heart is captured by the flames of rage or illicit desire (as all human hearts are wont to be captured from time to time), the Jew who desires to transform himself into a proper resting place for the *Shechina* must rid his heart of these unholy fires and restore the light of the *Shechina* in their place. But how can this be done?

The answer: by filling the heart with words of Torah and prayer.

The *ruach*, the spiritual counterpart of the human heart, is also the home of the human power of speech.

## **A SPEAKING SPIRIT**

Onkelos translates the Hebrew phrase *nishmat hayim*, "living being," (in the creation story, Genesis 2:7) as "speaking spirit." Indeed, the imagery of Onkelos is most apt, for the purpose of the *ruach* is to receive the communications of the *neshama* and transmit them to the *nefesh* so that they can be executed as deeds in the outside

world. Thus the essence of *ruach* is communication, as is the essence of speech.

The holy words of Torah and prayer have the capacity of filling the heart and putting out any unholy flames that are ignited within it. They are the fire extinguishers that God provided to counteract the unholy flames of the illicit desires that are innate to all of us.

*You shall place these words of mine upon your heart and upon your soul [nefesh in this verse] (Deut. 11:18)*

*You shall place* [in Hebrew the word is *vesantem*] The rabbis learn from this that the Torah is compared to an elixir of life or *sam tam*.

The lesson that God is teaching us can be expressed by the following metaphor: A person inflicted a large open wound on his beloved son but he placed an effective bandage on it. And he told his son: "My son, as long as you are careful to keep this bandage on your wound, you can eat what you like, drink what you like, wash in hot or cold water as you please without any fear of coming to harm. But if you remove the bandage the wound will become infected with gangrene." Similarly, God said to Israel, "My children, I created the evil inclination in you, but I gave you the Torah as an effective countermeasure. If you make it your business to occupy yourself with the Torah, you will never be delivered to the hands of the evil inclination, as it is written, *if you improve yourself, you will be uplifted* (Genesis 4:7). But if you do not

occupy yourself with the words of Torah, you will surely end up in its hands, as it is written, *sin lies in wait at the door* (Ibid)." (Talmud, Kidushin, 30b)

There is a deeper ramification to all this. As long as the *Shechina* occupies the Temple, it cannot be destroyed. Of what avail is the human machinery of destruction against the Divine Presence of God? In the same way, as long as a Jew is a human Temple and the link between his *neshama* and his *ruach* -- that is between his brain and his heart -- cannot be broken, he is invulnerable to the powers of evil.

## **DEPARTURE OF THE SHECHINA**

The destruction of the physical Temple is always necessarily preceded by the departure of the *Shechina*. In the case of the human being, this means that death can only happen when the *neshama* separates from the *ruach*.

Rabbi Chaim points out that this is a truly frightening thought. It implies that a human being with unclean thoughts and desires in his heart is really experiencing a type of living death. Rashi expresses this idea in the name of the Midrash in (Genesis 11:32) The evildoers are called dead even while they live, while the righteous are considered alive even in death.

But perhaps the most significant lesson to be derived from this essay involves the location of the source of Divine inspiration. There is no need to resort to heroic measures such as long fasts or intense meditation to feel the Presence of God. All you need is purity of heart. The *Shechina* will automatically come to rest on any observant Jew

who maintains this purity of heart. And on any Jew who allows hatred, anger, jealousy or licentiousness to occupy his heart no amount of heroic deeds will ever suffice to feel the inspiration of the Divine Presence.



### The Ark of the Oral Law

Rav Saadiah Gaon was living in Egypt when he was invited to become the head of the *yeshivah* in Sura in what is now Iraq (and thereby assume the honorary title of Gaon). His first immediate responsibility as the new *rosh yeshivah*, one all too familiar to modern-day *roshei yeshivah*, was to raise money for his *yeshivah*.

Rav Saadiah wasted no time. He approached one of the wealthy Jewish merchants of the Egyptian Jewish community and secured an extremely large donation. The man had one request. He wanted a plaque bearing his name affixed to the *aron kodesh*, the holy ark of the great and famous *yeshivah* of Sura. Rav Saadiah agreed, and the man turned over the funds.

When he arrived in Sura, Rav Saadiah discovered that a plaque bearing someone else's name was

already affixed to the *aron kodesh*. Someone else had already dedicated the *aron kodesh*!

Rav Saadiah wrote a letter to the donor from Egypt in which he explained that the *Aron Kodesh* had a dual significance, symbolizing both the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. It was the receptacle of the *Luchos*, the Tablets of the Ten Commandments. And it also symbolized the Torah scholar. Our Sages tell us that a person who wants to progress in Torah study should incline his head toward the south when he prays, because the *Aron Kodesh* was in the southern part of the *Heichal*, the Sanctuary.

"The *aron kodesh* in the *yeshivah* is the place of the Written Torah," he wrote to the donor in Egypt. "It contains the Torah scrolls. But where is the Oral Torah in the *yeshivah*? It is certainly not in the *aron kodesh*. It is in the hearts and minds of the rabbis and the students. It is to be found wherever someone is sitting and studying the Torah. By giving a contribution that enables people to sit and learn, you are, in effect, dedicating the *aron kodesh* of the Oral Law!"

If the Ark symbolized the Torah scholar, what was the significance of the gold covering within and without? The Talmud tells us (*Yoma 72b*), "Any Torah scholar who is not *tocho kebaro*, identical inside and out, is no Torah scholar." Just as the Ark was gilded within and without, so must the Torah scholar be a person of genuine character and integrity.

Elsewhere (*Berachos 27b*), the Talmud relates the famous story about Rabban Gamaliel's dispute with Rabbi Yehoshua. While Rabbi Gamaliel was head of the *yeshivah* he had followed an exclusive

admission policy, accepting only those students who were *tocham kebaram*, who were identical inside and out. As a result of his dispute with Rabbi Yehoshua, he was removed from office, and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah took his place. Rabbi Elazar changed the admission policy. He opened the doors to all comers, and several hundred new chairs were added. When Rabban Gamaliel heard about this, he was crestfallen, fearing that he had unfairly withheld Torah from the Jewish people.

The Chiddushei Harim wonders why Rabban Gamaliel was upset. He had known perfectly well that all these prospective students wanted to join the *yeshivah*. He had seen their applications. He had tested them, interviewed them and rejected them. And for good reason. He was looking for students who were *tocham kebaram*, genuine rather than superficial people, the real thing. He could have invited them all in, but he had chosen not to do so. Why should he suddenly have regrets when Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah let them in?

The Chiddushei Harim explains that he did not have those regrets immediately. But after a while, he noticed an amazing thing. All those students who had appeared superficial when he first met them were changing. The Torah they were learning was transforming them, penetrating into their hearts and minds and making them the real thing, the genuine article, true Torah scholars, gilded within and without. This was the cause of his regrets. He had not given these young men the opportunity to be exposed to Torah. He had seen them as they were and rejected them, when he should have realized that Torah study itself would

change them into the genuine Torah scholars they could have become from the beginning.

### **BURIED IN A DINING-ROOM TABLE**

The table, as well as the ark and the altar, was made of acacia wood. This was undoubtedly an extremely fine wood, fitting for such a high purpose as forming the holy furnishings of the *Mishkan*. Rabbeinu Bachya finds an additional homiletic significance to the use of this wood, which is called *shittim* in Hebrew. This forms an acronym for the words *shalom*, *tovah*, *yeshuah* and *mechilah*, which mean peace, goodness, salvation and forgiveness. In other words, all the gifts the Jewish people enjoyed, which these four blessings encompass, came to them through the conduit of the holy furnishings and vessels of the *Mishkan* and the *Beis Hamikdash*.

But what about our own times, when we no longer have these furnishings and vessels? How can we continue to receive these gifts?

Rabbeinu Bachya answers this question by citing a famous passage from the Talmud (*Chagigah* 27a), "Now that the *Beis Hamikdash* is no longer standing, a person receives atonement through his own table."

Which "table" atones for us and brings us blessing now that we don't have the *Beis Hamikdash*? Our dining-room table! If we feed the poor, welcome the traveler and host guests at our table, then the dining-room table - or the kitchen table for that matter - becomes our own personal altar of atonement.

Rabbeinu Bachya concludes on an awesome note, "There is a custom among the pious people in



## Trumah (Exodus 25:1-27:19) *advanced compendium*

France to construct their coffins from wood taken from their dining-room tables."

Think of the imagery. The people who have known the deceased, who have sat at his dining-room table, come to his funeral and see him being buried in a coffin that looks exactly like his dining-room table!

The message is clear, says Rabbeinu Bachya. A person take nothing along with him to the World of Truth except for the Torah he learned, the *mitzvos* he performed, the charity he gave and the goodness that he shared with other people around his dining-room table.

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