

IN RICH CONCENTRATION

by Rabbi Label Lam

They should make for Me a sanctuary and I will dwell amongst them! (Shemos 25:8)

They should make for Me a sanctuary: They should make for My Name a house of holiness! (Rashi)

What's the key ingredient of the Tabernacle or any subsequent Mikdash Me'at- Synagogue? Amongst the many specifications for constructing the Tabernacle one detail supersedes and precedes them all. What is that?

On our way home from a glorious community Shabbaton in Providence Rhode Island we decided to take a detour and visit the famous Touro Synagogue. It was a rainy day and a few brave souls signed up for the tour. It was quite fascinating to be in contact with a relic where Jewish and American History intersected so strongly. In the middle of our guide's presentation a woman raised her hand and asked, "Why is-that the women sit up stairs in the balcony and the men sit down stairs? Is it because of distraction?" The poor tour-guide got all flustered and rambled for a few moments before, in desperation, she turned her attention to me and asked, "Is that right Rabbi? Is it because of distraction?"

It was my day off. I was just spending time with my family. I must be some kind of antenna for these things. I guess it comes with the territory and the garb. I didn't like the tilt of the question and I was afraid of where it might go. So, with help from heaven, an answer flashed into my mind and out the mouth that I think they appreciated. I told them, "It's not so much about "distraction" as it is about "concentration". If one takes prayer seriously and we do, then it's critical to create a place where one can focus. Prayer for us is serious like surgery."

It occurred to me that to see the building as a social center or an architectural landmark is to miss the essence. It's a place where one actually comes to meet the Divine Presence. It might be that simple and that profound.

When the Kotzker Rebbe was himself a lad his Rebbe asked him, "Where can G-d be found?" The precocious young Menachem Mendel answered, "Everywhere!" The Rebbe repeated the question and the young future rebbe repeated his answer with ever more insistence until he broke down and asked his teacher, "Where can HASHEM be found?" The rebbe answered, "Wherever He is allowed to enter!"

A young Rabbi asked his student, "How come you have never come to my house for Shabbos? The

student looked at the Rebbe with a wondrous look! The Rebbe asked his student again. This time the student worked up the courage and answered, "Rebbe, you never invited me!" The Tabernacle, like any other future Synagogue, is not merely an address for mortal meetings or a structural expression of our "edifice complex". It is a rather sophisticated invitation.

In the last two stanzas of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport", he writes, "And thus with reverted look/ The mystic volume of the word they read/ Spelling it backward like a Hebrew book/ Till life became a Legend of the Dead// But ah! What once has been shall be no more!/ The groaning earth in travail and in pain/ Brings forth its races, but does not restore/ And the dead nations never rise again..."

Longfellow had obviously underestimated that invisible quotient the Jewish Nation would find in such structures such as these in rich concentration. Text Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and **Torah.org**.