

RETURN: ALWAYS AN OPTION

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And Moshe gathered the entire congregation of the Children of Israel, and he said to them, 'these are the objects which G-d has Commanded that they be made.'" [351]

For the past several weeks, from Parshas Terumah through Tetzaveh and the beginning of Ki Sisa, the Torah readings discussed the building of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, predecessor of the Temple in Jerusalem. The same is true during this week's dual reading of Vayakhel-Pikudei.

This could have been one continuous story. Moshe ascends Mt. Sinai at the end of Parshas Mishpatim, is instructed concerning the building the Mishkan and is given the Tablets which were to be kept in its inner sanctuary, comes down, instructs the people, and they build it.

Instead, we took a detour. The episode of the Golden Calf interrupted the process. The original Tablets were destroyed, and HaShem contemplated destroying the entire nation as well, before ultimately forgiving them and giving them the Second Tablets. Only then did they build the Tabernacle.

Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that as a result of this interruption, the Nation of Israel built this great House from a very different perspective than they would have otherwise. From the beginning of the Exodus up until Sinai, the story of the Jewish People had been one of continuous ascent. To be certain, they had already tested their new relationship with the Holy One, but this occurred during their transition from the depths of Egyptian impurity to the spiritual heights of the Revelation at Sinai. Now, they were a Holy nation, ready to be G-d's standard-bearers to the world.

What did they do? They failed again. Not only did they descend from their tremendous spiritual height, but they even approached idolatry, denial of G-d's Kingship. Thus they saw their own tremendous fallibility. "The people and the priests had learned to know themselves in their state of complete immature weakness, to realize the necessity for incessant work on themselves, and how great was their necessity for elevation and Atonement."

There is also a second change which resulted from their failure. "They had also learned to know G-d in the whole weight of His justice and the infinite depth of His grace. From the stage of feeling completely rejected by G-d, up to the extreme height of regained grace, they had tasted every shade of our relation to G-d."

The Nation learned that Teshuvah, return to G-d, is always possible -- and that we must constantly

look for our failings and return from them. Or as Rabbi Hirsch says, "at any and every degree of falling from it, G-d's grace can always be regained." The Tabernacle, this symbol of our connection to G-d, was built by a people who recognized that each of us, as individuals, must constantly strive to rebuild that connection.

A second lesson is that much as the Tabernacle may have symbolized this connection, return to G-d is possible without the Tabernacle or Temple itself. "The very greatest national crime was committed, and the highest grace of G-d was regained, _without Temple and without offering_." The Temple and its offerings do not make the connection -- they merely show the way. If this requires proof, says Rabbi Hirsch, it lies "in this experience which preceded the first building of the Temple."

This lesson was reiterated by King Solomon when he completed the building of the Temple itself. In I Kings 8 he says a prayer of Dedication in front of the Altar. He asks G-d to hear the prayers of those who pray in this great House of G-d. But in addition, he also says that if people sin, and G-d carries them into exile, that G-d should hear them if they return to Him, and pray towards their land, the city of Jerusalem, and the Temple.

We have no Temple -- but we have the only tools we need to return to G-d. All we need to do now, is use them!

[Quotations taken from the translation from German by Isaac Levy.]

Good Shabbos,
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