

TORAH AND MITZVOS - A PORTABLE SANCTUARY

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

A Rosh Yeshiva once related how in the city of Hartford, Connecticut, a major campaign was launched to build a new building to house the city's growing Jewish day-school. The dedication of the school's main structure, no small honour, was given a price-tag of \$250,000. The board of directors decided to approach a certain wealthy Jew who had in the past been a staunch supporter, and give him the first chance to dedicate the building. He was receptive to their offer, but said that he needed some time to think things over, seeing as how such a substantial amount of money was in question. In the meantime, the proposition was mentioned to another philanthropist, who immediately jumped at the opportunity, and wrote out a cheque for \$250,000 on the spot. Ultimately, the first gentleman also decided to take them up on their offer. Finding out that he had already missed his opportunity, he was enraged. A bitter fight ensued which eventually led to a lawsuit; the first magnate suing the yeshiva for giving away his right to someone else! (I imagine there are fundraisers out there who might be thinking there could be worse fates than to have to deal with such lawsuits.)

Fundraisers around the globe will tell you the same thing: It is far easier to procure donations for a building fund or a new synagogue than it is to raise money to support the day-to-day functioning of a yeshiva - to pay its cooks and its rebbeim. Somehow one feels that when his money is going to build a building, he's getting something of great value, something everlasting and eternal. If one's cheque is going just to pay the bills, it feels as if his funds are simply being swallowed up, with nothing to show for posterity, save perhaps a reduced (or daresay eliminated) overdraft balance in the yeshiva's battered bank account, which will likely soon be overdrawn once again.

In this week's parsha we read about the unfortunate halacha (law) of an eved ivri, a Jewish slave who, as a result of his own poverty, sold himself into the servitude of a non-Jewish master. If possible, his Jewish brethren must redeem him, for it is not acceptable for a Jew to live his life among the heathens. In the meantime, the Torah warns that he must remain faithful to the mitzvos:

You shall not make idols for yourselves, and you shall not erect for yourselves a statue or a pillar... My Sabbaths you shall observe, and My Sanctuary you shall revere; I am Hashem. [26:1-2]

Although these verses appear to address all Jews, Rashi, based on the fact that they are repetitive, and that they are found immediately following the section of a Jewish slave, understands that the Torah issues here a special admonition to the Jewish slave: Living among non-Jews, you will be

exposed to a lifestyle far different than what you have learned; be especially careful not to forsake your heritage.

R' Moshe Feinstein zt"l (Darash Moshe) asks: According to Rashi, why doesn't the Torah issue additional warnings appropriate to the slave living among non-Jews, such as to refrain from marrying a non-Jew, avoiding other forbidden relationships, keeping kosher, etc.? Evidently, by admonishing him to avoid avodah zara/idol worship, the Torah means to include all types of behaviour which are not in tune with Torah and halacha. If so, why does the verse single out the mitzvah of Shabbos, and that of "fearing the Sanctuary of Hashem?"

The religious life of a gentile, especially that of an idol worshipper, centres around his place of worship. There he comes to prostrate himself before the gods, to offer his sacrifices, and to beseech the deity. What the pagan does in the privacy of his home is not only divorced from his worship, but perhaps even antithetical to it. He sees no contradiction between his religiously-devoid life at home, and his worship in the temples. One pays ones dues by worshipping the deity, and then one goes home and lives it up. Understandably, under the terms of such a setup, great honour and fear is awarded the sacred place of worship.

While we too are commanded to fear the Mikdash (Tabernacle/Holy Temple) and treat it with great respect, its laws are given only after the laws of Shabbos, as well as most of the Torah's mitzvos. Furthermore, the construction of the Mikdash, as important as it is, may not take place on Shabbos. This is not by chance. The Torah is alluding to us that Jewish life centres around mitzvah and halacha observance, only part of which is serving Hashem from His holiest place. It is not to belittle, G-d forbid, the importance of the Mikdash, for who's destruction we continue to mourn almost 2000 years after the fact, but rather to understand that Jewish life can and does continue to function even without a central Mikdash. Indeed, he notes, nowhere does the Torah explicitly command that, aside from the Mikdash, we build ourselves places of worship. The Torah accompanies a Jew wherever he goes and whatever he does; when he does business, when he goes shopping; even when he washes, bathes, and uses the facilities!

There is reason for concern, says R' Moshe, that while living among the gentiles, the Jewish slave will come under the influence of their religious outlook, which emphasises the fear and holiness of a place of worship above all else, and passively grants permission to do one's one thing elsewhere. The Torah thus reminds him that while: You shall fear My Sanctuary - at the same time, My Sabbaths you shall observe - and forget not that keeping Shabbos takes precedence over the Sanctuary. Don't be persuaded by their obsession with a central place of worship (from which the slave would likely be distant while in servitude); Shabbos, and all the mitzvos, accompany a Jew wherever he goes.

While we dearly miss the Beis Ha-Mikdash, Jewish life has continued to flourish even after its destruction. Indeed, a Sanctuary without Torah and mitzvos is, to us, no more than an expensive and

gaudy edifice. It is Shabbos, Torah, and strict mitzvah adherence which brings life and kedusha (sanctity) to the Jewish sanctuary; not the fancy ornaments nor the stained-glass windows.

What a shame, he says, that we give so willingly to erect structures and build buildings, yet it is so difficult to get people to commit funds for the study of Torah. It is not the building which beautifies the Torah, but rather the Torah which gives life and meaning to the structure. One should allocate a greater portion of his funds to support the actual study of Torah, R' Moshe rules, than he does to build yeshivos and dedicate synagogues.

Have a good Shabbos.

This week's publication is sponsored by the Pavel family, in memory of R' Yitzchak ben R' Yekusiel Yehudah Pavel. May his memory be a blessing.

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