

TAKEN TO TASK - HOW TO ERECT A MISHKAN

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

David Ha-Melech (King David) writes in Tehillim (Psalms 62:13): "And Yours, Hashem, is kindness, for You repay each man according to his deeds." The question is obvious: Why does the Psalmist classify as "kindness" the "rewarding of each man according to his deeds"? Is it not appropriate and even fitting that man should be repayed according to what he has done?

The Ramban (above 31:2) notes that it seems unlikely that during their captivity in Egypt any of the Jews would have had the opportunity to learn and develop the high level of skilled craftsmanship required for the intricate work of the construction of the Mishkan (Tabernacle). Rather, when Moshe conveyed the Divine instruction about the needed labourers, volunteers appeared and offered to help, though in truth they were completely unqualified to do so. It was, he explains, by means of Divine inspiration that they were able to complete their tasks, for they themselves lacked the skills, and had no qualified instructors. Even so, the Torah ascribes the completion of the Mishkan to them, since they volunteered, and did whatever they could.

This, explain Mefarshim (see Living Each Week pp. 195), is what David Ha-Melech meant: Yours, Hashem, is kindness, for You repay each man according to his deeds - even when man, by measure of his own abilities and skill-level, is completely incapable of realizing what he accomplished, and has only done so by dint of Divine inspiration and assistance, even so, You repay him as if he had done everything on his own! This indeed is a kindness.

Why is this concept taught and brought to light here, specifically with regard to the mitzvah of building a Sanctuary?

According to our Sages, the commandment to build a Sanctuary applies not only to the generation of Jews who dwelled in the desert, but to every Jew in every generation. (above 25:8) And make for Me a Sanctuary, and I will dwell in them - Scripture does not say "I will dwell in it," but rather, "I will dwell in them" - i.e. I will dwell in every Jew. By leading a life of Torah, mitzvos, and kedushah (sanctity), a Jew - in a manner of speaking - becomes a walking Tabernacle; a location in the physical world where the Divine presence finds comfort. This aspect of building a Mishkan applies to everyone.

Mind you, becoming a human-Mishkan is no mean task. It's not as if we can just get up in the morning, pledge allegiance, put on tefillin and do a few mitzvos, and then declare that our bodies are sanctified and ready to serve as the Tabernacle, or its later manifestation, the Bais Ha- Mikdash -

the Holy Temple! I would hazard a guess that very few of us feel comfortable in our roll as a dwelling place for the Divine presence; and rightly so!

So do we just give up? Should we resign ourselves to the fact that just as the physical Mikdash was destroyed, so too we have lost our ability to serve as a conduit to Hashem's presence?

What we learn from the construction of the Mishkan is exactly this: It's not up to us! Left to our own abilities and capacities, there would never have been a Mishkan, nor would the Divine presence (Shechina) ever have graced the lowly earth. All that Hashem asks is that we volunteer to do the work - i.e. that we are committed to try our best to lead a life dedicated to Torah and mitzvos.

The Mishnah (Avos 2:16) drives home this point when it states, bluntly, "It is not incumbent on you to finish the work - but neither are you free to absolve yourself from it!" When the day of reckoning comes, we will not be "taken to task" for what we have or have not accomplished, but rather for our lack of effort, dedication, and willingness to undertake tasks we were uncomfortable with or were convinced were beyond our means.

The Midrash (Tanchuma 11 - quoted by Rashi) says that when the time came to erect the Mishkan, none of the wise craftsmen were able to figure out how to get it to stay standing. They brought the Mishkan to Moshe, but he too couldn't erect it. Moshe said to Hashem, "What should I do?" Answered the Almighty, "Moshe, make motions with your body as if you're putting up the Mishkan - I'll do the rest!" Even Moshe, the greatest of all prophets, was humanly incapable of creating a dwelling place for Hashem. All he could do was go through the motions - the rest was taken care of by Hashem!

According to the same Midrash, the Mishkan was erected and dismantled each day (of the Seven Days of Inauguration). According to the opinion of Rabbi Chanina, it was erected and dismantled three times a day! Why? Why not just get it standing and then leave it that way (at least until the time came to travel)?

This comes to teach us, says the Nesivos Shalom, that the task of erecting a Mishkan is not something accomplished on one's first try. One gets one's "Mishkan" standing, only to suffer a setback, and have it dismantled. He tries again, and again gets it standing, perhaps this time even more firmly than before, yet once again finds it taken apart. Part of the difficulty of its construction, then, is in not becoming disheartened at the seemingly endless process of back-and-forth implied by this daily cycle of up and down. "It's all in a day's work."

It is noteworthy, he adds, that if during the seven days it was erected three times each day, then in total it was erected 21 times. The numerical value of the number 21 is "Eh-yeh - I will be." This teaches us that it is not the final product that is of interest, but rather the commitment and dedication - the Jew's willingness to declare "I will be!" - that really counts.

One Purim, a certain tzaddik who was napping was awoken by a knock on his door. He got up and

opened it, and was greeted by a chassid.

"What do you want?" asked the Rebbe.

"I have come to bring the Rebbe mishloach manos."

"But you are not holding anything," asked the Rebbe.

"It fell in the snow and was ruined."

"So what do you want?"

"I want sechar tircha - reward for my efforts!" replied the chassid proudly.

"Indeed, you are so right!" replied the Rebbe. "A Jew is sent to this world to bring back with him Torah and mitzvos. Yet often, when he returns his soul to its Maker, and he is asked what he has brought along, the pitiful answer is 'nothing.'

"So then what are you doing here?' asks the Heavenly tribunal, 'you have no place in heaven!'

"But I tried,' the Jew replies. 'It's just that things didn't quite turn out as I planned. Can't you at least give me reward for my efforts?'

"And he is indeed," concluded the Rebbe. After all, Yours, Hashem, is kindness, for you repay each man according to his deeds - and effort, not by what he has accomplished.

Have a good Shabbos.

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