

GRINDING GROUND FLOUR

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week we read parshas T'rumah -- the donations given by Bnei Yisroel [the Children of Israel] toward the building of the Mishkan [Tabernacle]. "Speak to Bnei Yisroel v'yikchu lee t'rumah [and take for me donation(s)][25:2]." The raw materials needed for this construction are then listed.

The Torah then clarifies the purpose of this Mishkan. "And make for me a Mikdash [House of Holiness] and I will dwell in their midst [25:8]." It is called both a Mikdash and a Mishkan. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that Mikdash refers to our role and Mishkan refers to the role of Hashem. Mikdash refers to the sanctification that we must do in order to make ourselves and thereby the Mikdash a place worthy and deserving of Hashem's presence. Once that has been successfully accomplished, then we can hope for Mishkan, Hashem's holy presence descending to and dwelling in this physical world.

The Mishkan -- the meeting point of the spiritual and the physical, of the heavens and the earth, of man and his Creator. As indicated above, the purpose is not that Hashem will dwell in the house but rather that He will dwell in our midst.

We have a tendency to focus on the external, thereby ignoring the true essence or, at least, relegating it to a level of secondary importance. This was a mistake that we made throughout history, always with disastrous results. As Rav Hirsch writes in regard to the three times that Hashem rejected the Sanctuary -- once in Shilo and twice in Yerushalayim -- it was always made clear that the reason for the destruction was not any imperfection in the construction or maintenance of the Sanctuaries. The 'external' was in perfect working order. Rather, when we were no longer sanctifying and dedicating our lives to the fulfillment of His holy will and law, then Hashem's presence would no longer remain in our midst. At that point, the nations were able to destroy, not the Mishkan of Hashem, but rather, the gilded, golden shell that had once contained His presence, but had long since, due to our actions, been deserted.

Chaza"l, when discussing the destruction wrought onto the Beis Hamikdash by Titos and Nebuchadnezer, are pointed and concise. "Kamcha t'chinah tachant" -- ground flour was grounded. The spiritual essence and content had already been destroyed by the only ones capable of causing such destruction -- we ourselves. Once the 'flour had already been ground', once the Shechina [Hashem's presence] had already left, Titos and Nebuchadnezer were then able to enter and destroy the physical edifice, 'to ground that which had already been grounded.'

The Chofetz Chaim offers a powerful mashal {parable} about those who adorn the Torah magnificently on the outside while wantonly ignoring its content. He told of two sisters who had been extremely close while growing up but had moved very far from each other at the time of their marriages. With communication and transportation being what it was in those days, they virtually had no contact.

Finally, at a family get-together, they were tearfully reunited. At their first opportunity, they went off to a side room to catch up with one another and see what hand life had dealt them.

"Just look at you!" one exclaimed to the other. "Look at that outfit you're wearing! It's gorgeous! And that fur coat I saw you take off when you arrived, I've never even seen a coat like that! You must have a very wonderful life. You must be so very happy."

The sister smiled a bitter smile. "My dear sister, don't be fooled by my appearance. You are right that I have beautiful clothing. My husband insists that I dress exquisitely at all times. However, it's not me that he's trying to please -- he just wants me to look good to impress everyone else. As for me? Why, he couldn't care less about what's important to me. When we're alone, he gives me no respect at all. When I ask him to do something, he simply ignores me. No, my life is not a very happy one at all. But, enough about me," she said, turning to her sister who was dressed very simply, "tell me about your life. Your face seems to have a beautiful glow to it!"

"Well," she began, "as you can see we are not very wealthy at all. In fact, I lead a very simple, frugal life. We simply can't afford expensive clothing or really any new clothing for that matter. However, my husband cares about me very deeply. Anything that I ask of him he jumps to do. I don't even have to ask... Once he realizes that something is important to me, he does his best to take care of it as quickly and as well as he can. He's totally devoted to me. I couldn't ask for more. I am very, very happy."

Don't focus on the external. Don't be fooled by the adornments. The Shechinah either dwells or doesn't dwell in our midst, not in the midst of any building. The only way to make the Shechinah feel 'comfortable' is to care about His will.

Avrohom the son of Avrohom, the famous Ger Tzedek [the Righteous Convert] revealed an even deeper insight into seeing through the external to the very core of a matter. He was the son of a wealthy Polish feudal lord who was being groomed to be a priest. He was drawn to Judaism and ultimately converted. Out of fear of the brutal Inquisition, he was learning secretly while hiding in a small town in Lithuania.

The forces of the Inquisition ultimately caught up with him there and he was taken to Vilna where he was imprisoned. He was given the choice to either renounce his Judaism by returning to Christianity or to be burned at the stake. With all of their threats and tortures, he steadfastly refused to utter a word against Judaism. As they were taking him to be killed, the guards said to him: "Here in this world we are punishing you but in the next world you'll have your chance to avenge us."

The Ger Tzedek turned to his oppressors with a serene smile. "I'll tell you a story that happened to me when I was a young boy. I used to play with the children of the serfs on my father's estate. One day, after hours of work, I had shaped clay into men-shaped figurines and had placed them around the garden. As the farmer's children came through with their thick boots, they trampled and destroyed these figurines. In a fit of rage, I ran to my father demanding that he severely punish these boys. Not only didn't my father get angry at the boys, but he chastised me for taking such nonsense so seriously. I thought to myself that now I'm young and not in a position to make them pay for their crime, but once I get older and have some power, then I'll make them regret what they did to me. However, once I got older and I was in power, do you think that I seriously considered punishing them? What did they do to me? All they did was smash figures made of clay."

The Ger Tzedek then turned to his oppressors. "Do you think that once I've obtained the clarity of the next world, I'll want to take revenge against you? What are you going to do to me? Smash my body? A figure of clay..."

Not fooled by the exterior -- a true dwelling place for the Shechinah.

Good Shabbos,

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