

MAINTAINING GREATNESS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The haftorah for this week's parsha describes the efforts of the great King Shlomo in the construction of the First Temple. King Shlomo himself is a great and tragic figure. The attitude of the Talmud towards him is an ambivalent one.

On one hand, he is the builder of the Temple, the expander of the kingdom, the builder of great fortresses, and the administrator of twelve districts of his country. He is also the wisest of all men who understands even the sounds of animals and birds, the author of three of the great books of the Bible and someone upon whom the Divine Spirit itself has rested.

And yet on the other hand, the Talmud questions his right to immortality, criticizes his excesses and hubris, condemns his tolerance of the public support of idolatry by his foreign wives and even attributes the rise of Rome and the subsequent destruction of the Second Temple to his marrying the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh.

Jewish legend actually has him driven off of his throne by a demon and having to wander in exile for part of his life. All of this naturally dims the luster of his great earlier accomplishment of building the Temple.

The haftorah parallels the parsha in the description of the work in constructing the mishkan and its artifacts, with the same type of artisanship in the creation of the Temple and its artifacts.

Shlomo, so to speak, becomes the second Moshe in supervising the building of the house of God. But, in the case of Moshe, the building of the mishkan was only one of his career's accomplishments and was dwarfed by his major accomplishment of teaching and instilling Torah within the people of Israel. The building of the Temple by Shlomo was the highpoint of his career and afterwards he slipped off of the mighty pedestal of greatness that he had attained.

The Talmud teaches us that "happy are those whose later years do not shame their earlier accomplishments." My old law school professor taught us that every lawyer makes a bad mistake at least once in his professional career. He also stated that those who are fortunate enough to make that mistake early in their career are truly blessed because they can recover and advance.

Making it late in one's professional life can be disastrous to one's reputation and life. The reverse trend may be true of accomplishments.

Early accomplishments can be very dangerous because they set a standard and inspire a sense of

self aggrandizement that will prevent any further achievements. Only a gradual ascent and mature considerations, which usually are part and parcel of advancing years, can guarantee that those early achievements become lasting and untarnished by later behavior.

The comparison between the two great builders of God's house - Moshe and Shlomo - is illustrative of this truth.

Building God's house is a great achievement in itself. Maintaining it and using it for greater spiritual influence and instruction to the people of Israel is an even greater achievement.

Shabat shalom.

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com