

THE RAMBAN'S MESSAGE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 13th century Barcelona) points out that the conclusion of the book of Shemot, with its detailed recording of the construction and expenditures involved in the completion of the Mishkan/Tabernacle, places the Jewish people as a whole at the level of spirituality that was present in the homes of our patriarchs and matriarchs at the conclusion of the previous book of Bereshith.

Just as the spirit of the Lord hovered over the tents of our forbearers, so now did it become recognizable and present amongst the nation of Israel. Constructed for that purpose, the spirit of the Lord dwelled within the Mishkan/Tabernacle. There is an important message contained in this observation.

This Jewish tradition teaches us that there are two places, so to speak, where the Lord's presence may be experienced and should be cultivated. God's glory fills the entire universe; He is omnipresent. But the puny human being cannot encompass the entire universe in all of its vastness and complexity. We need a personal God that we can relate to somehow.

That God can be found according to Jewish tradition in two places in our small and narrow world. One place is in our home, our family and our daily lives. The second place of Godly encounter is in the house of worship and study and Torah service. That is our substitute Mishkan/Tabernacle where the spirit of God hovers over those buildings and is recognizable to us only if we are attuned and sensitive enough to experience it. These two pillars of Jewish life have accompanied us on our long journey the world - and through our history.

Both of these bastions of Jewish strength and vitality - the home and the synagogue/study hall - the meeting places so to speak of Israel with its God, are under siege and attack in today's modern society. The home, marriage, children and the sense of family has given way to relationships, moving-in and out, later marriages, a large number of divorces and spousal abuse, and the sacrifice of children and family on the altars of career and hedonism.

Without strong Jewish families there cannot be a strong State of Israel or a viable Jewish nation. Certainly intermarriage has eroded the concept of Jewish family but even when this does not occur, the bonds of family are frayed by television, the internet and the society generally. Sometimes even

well meaning gestures are counterproductive.

During my years as a rabbi in Miami Beach we always had many Shabat guests and because of that, contact between us and our own young children was pretty much eliminated. One Friday one of our younger daughters said to my wife: "Mommy, are children also guests?" We got the message and then made certain that one of the Shabat meals would be exclusively with our children.

The synagogue also has lost much since it became the matter of the whims and comfort of the attendees and no longer the House of God where He is to be glimpsed and served according to His wishes as expressed in Torah and halacha. I hope that the message of the Ramban will certainly not be lost upon us.

Shabat shalom. Rabbi Berel Wein

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