

PARSHAS TERUMAH - THE SHULCHAN AND TORAH ECONOMICS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The Shulchan and Torah Economics¹

Take off your glasses, and view the scene from the distance. You will get the impression that the two objects that stood in front of the kodesh kodashim symbolized wisdom and sustenance. You will be wrong, because you will have missed all the fine detail.

The beauty is in those details. Think again. Resting upon the shulchan was the lechem hapanim. Now, the bread itself is an adequate symbol of nourishment and sustenance. The table must add to that. So must the levonah/ frankincense^[2] that had to be placed atop each stack of loaves.

We think of a table as any elevated space upon which objects are placed. Shulchan, however, connotes specifically a table upon which food is presented. (Think of שלח, to send forth, as part of the word shulchan.) When we speak of someone who "sets a fine table," we also refer to this narrower meaning of the word. While the bread alone might have symbolized sustenance, the bread taken together with the shulchan points us in the direction of material well-being and comfort.

The frankincense is a spice. We might have expected to use the more elaborate concoction of the ketores. The difference between them is simple. Ketores is a carefully compounded blend of spices, mixed to specification. It is man-made, while frankincense, as a single stand-alone ingredient, is natural. We often use the idea of smell to convey how appealing something is to us. Think of the idiomatic use of something "smelling good," or "smelling rotten" to us.

Now put it all together. The bread topped off with the natural, fragrant spice of frankincense, and placed in our field of vision on an ornate table, amounts to a representation of sustenance in abundance, available to us in comfort and ease, leaving us with a feeling of pleasing satisfaction and euphoria. They represent far more than sustenance alone, carrying with them all the associations of the material well-being of the nation.

While gold lined the shulchan's top, the gemara insists that halachically it should be considered a wooden utensil, not a metal one. The gold component does not stand alone, but is an adjunct to the essential wooden structure. Metal is static, unchanging. Wood is dynamic, forever growing. It is limited only by the boundaries that it sets for itself to permit even more effective blossoming. The economic system represented by the shulchan need know no absolute boundaries. With the beracha from HKBH that we seek in this special place, we seek material well-being that can multiply

without end.

The misgeres, a wooden rim, surrounded the shulchan. According to one view, it ran along the top surface of the shulchan; according to another, it ran below it, adding stability to the legs upon which it stood. Wherever it was placed, the Torah describes the zer, a crown of gold encircling this misgeres.

Three metals were used in the Mishkan: bronze/copper, silver, and gold. It can easily be shown that they are used in the symbolism of the Mishkan as a sequence, with gold representing the notion of greatest purity and refinement. Thus, the Torah is telling us something about our attitude towards the flourishing of material enterprise. Aside from internal regulation, the most important constraint upon the growth of material success is the purity of our intention in striving for it.

If the misgeres stood on the upper surface of the shulchan, it functions as a kind of protective barrier, symbolically keeping out what does not belong there. For our material pursuits to be successful, to protect their integrity, our lives must shine with the golden luster of holiness in the extreme. Our holiness will prevent baser motives from mixing in with our pursuits, compromising their integrity and sustainability.

If, on the other hand, the misgeres acted to hold the four legs together, then its golden crown tells a different story. Its statement would then be that our material success stands upon purity and holiness. In other words, our efforts in this realm must be entirely for the sake of Heaven. Material pursuits can quickly mire a person in the limitations of the physical and sensual. The Torah stipulates that we turn to them with holier intentions.

The arrangement of the loaves points to a delicate balance between the good of the many and individual rights. Each loaf was a strange looking affair. Baking molds had each loaf looking like the letter "U," with a flat bottom, and ends that were turned upward, so that the "arms" of each loaf seemed to support the loaf above it. As much (or close to as much) of the length of the loaf was oriented towards the next loaf as it employed as its own base! Our commitment to one another, to brotherliness, to the good of the many is a precondition to our material affairs. We must see each ourselves as working as much for our fellow as for ourselves. The loaves were stacked in two columns of six each, altogether symbolizing the twelve tribes. Visually, they create the impression of a system of material involvement that is oriented towards giving and sharing, of setting selfishness aside, and each man working to bear the load of others in the community.

It would be misleading to stop here - even though some societies do! Closer examination of the way the loaves were stacked reveals a countervailing ethic at work. Each bank of six loaves stood between two vertical boards. Running between these boards were metal tubes, which offered support to the loaves. While the arms of the loaves were stretched up as if to bear the burden of the loaf above, these tubes kept them ever so slightly apart. What emerges is that no loaf would be crushed by the burden upon it, and no loaf would be so confined by its association with the others

that it enjoyed no "breathing" space of its own. While each member of our national economic association must be preoccupied with the good of the many, the rights of the individual must be preserved. The national partnership can only be strong if individual parts are free and encouraged to improve their own lots.

1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Shemos 25:23-30
 2. Vayikra 24:7
 3. Menachos 97A
 4. Meshech Chochmah observes that when one enters the Mishkan, he sees the shulchan on the right, and the Menorah (symbolizing wisdom), on the left. Given our general association of the right side with importance, shouldn't the places have been reversed? He explains that the right is also associated with actions done for the right reason - lishmah. The Shulchan had to be on the right because activity in the material world must be done leshem Shomayim, or it becomes trivialized. Learning Torah, on the other hand, can be done shelo lishmah, and it will eventually lead to lishmah.
-