

In this week's *Parashah*, we read of the *Mitzvah* to build the *Mishkan* / Tabernacle in the desert and, later, the *Bet Hamikdash*. The anonymous sage known only as "a Levi from Barcelona" (Spain; 13th century) offers what he describes as a possible reason for this *Mitzvah*: Know, he writes, that *Hashem* gets nothing out of our *Mitzvah* performance. Rather, all He wants is to do good for us. But, in order for Him to do good for us, we need to be good. Therefore, He informed us how we can become good--namely, by observing the Torah. This is the meaning of the verses (*Devarim* 10:12-13), "Now, *Yisrael*, what does *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, ask of you? Only to fear *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, . . . to observe the commandments of *Hashem* and His decrees, which I command you today, for your benefit."

He continues: In light of the above, we must say that building a *Mikdash* for *Hashem*, and praying and offering sacrifices there, is intended to prepare our hearts to serve Him; *Hashem* Himself has no need to dwell among human beings. It is well known that man is influenced by his actions, and the more frequently a person performs a good deed, the more the thoughts in his heart will be purified and refined. Therefore, He commanded us to establish a place that will be the epitome of purity, where, through his actions, man can purify his thoughts and direct his heart to Him. Perhaps He chose the specific location [*i.e.*, the Temple Mount in Yerushalayim] because it is the "center" of the world, or perhaps for some other reason that He alone knows. (*Sefer Ha'chinuch* No. 95)

Tefilah

This year, we will iy"H devote this space to discussing various aspects of our prayers. This week, we continue the subject of "Kavanah."

R' Moshe ben Maimon z"l (*Rambam*; 1135-1204; Spain and Egypt) writes: "Any prayer recited without *Kavanah* is not a prayer."

(*Hilchot Tefilah* 4:15)

Elsewhere, *Rambam* writes: "If one prayed, but did not have *Kavanah*, he should pray again. If he had *Kavanah* during the first blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei*, he need not repeat the prayer."

(*Ibid.* 10:1)

R' Chaim Soloveitchik z"l ("R' Chaim Brisker"; 1853-1918) writes: At first glance, these two *Halachot* seem to contradict each other. It appears, therefore, that each is speaking of a different type of *Kavanah*.

He explains: One form of *Kavanah* is knowing the meanings of the prayers' words. Ideally, one should understand the meaning of all of the words. Nevertheless, one fulfills his obligation to pray even if he understands only the words of the first *Berachah* of *Shemoneh Esrei*. This is the subject of the second *Halachah* quoted above.

The other form of *Kavanah* is knowing that one is standing before G-d. This is the subject of the first *Halachah* quoted above, as *Rambam* himself writes in the next paragraph (4:16): "*Kavanah* means that one should remove all thoughts from his mind and see himself as if he is standing before the *Shechinah* / Divine Presence." Without this *Kavanah*, one does not fulfill his obligation to pray, according to *Rambam*.

R' Soloveitchik continues: This latter form of *Kavanah* is not a detail of the laws of prayer, as is the first type of *Kavanah*. Rather, it goes to the essence of prayer. If one does not appreciate that he is standing before G-d, he simply has not prayed, just as any act performed absent-mindedly [for example, turning a light on or off on *Shabbat* without being aware of what one is doing] is not an act in the eyes of *Halachah*.

(*Chiddushei Rabbeinu Chaim Ha'Levi*)

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“And the cubit on one side and the cubit on the other side, that are extra in the length of the curtains of the Tent, shall hang over the sides of the Tabernacle on one side and the other, to cover it.” (26:13)

Rashi z”l comments: “The Torah here teaches you *Derech Eretz* / a rule of life that a person should take care of beautiful things.” [Until here from *Rashi*]

R’ Yosef Tendler z”l (1932-2012; *Menahel* of Mechinas Ner Israel in Baltimore, Maryland) writes: I heard from R’ Avraham Yaakov Pam z”l (1913-2001; *Rosh Yeshiva* of Mesivta Torah Voda’ath in Brooklyn, N.Y.) that *Rashi*’s comment applies as much to spiritual beauty as to physical beauty. For example, if someone studied in *yeshiva* for many years and acquired a certain aura of holiness, he should make sure that when he leaves the *yeshiva* to enter the workforce or to find a spouse, he takes care to maintain his “beauty” and not to fall from his level. (Od Yosef Chai)

“You shall erect the Tabernacle according to its laws, as you were shown on the mountain.” (26:30)

R’ Srayah Deblitzki z”l (1926-2018; Bnei Brak, Israel) writes: *Hashem* did not command Moshe himself to make all of the parts of the *Mishkan* or its *Kelim* / implements. As the Torah relates, that work was done by Betzalel, Ohaliav, and many other, unnamed men and women. Why, then, was Moshe commanded to erect the *Mishkan* himself?

R’ Deblitzki explains: Imagine that a very sophisticated machine--for example, an aircraft or spaceship--has been assembled. Each of the thousands of parts conforms perfectly to its specifications and is in its proper place, yet, for some reason, the machine does not work. The project’s engineers are stymied, until the world’s leading expert inspects the machine and notices that one screw is loose. That one loose screw is preventing the machine from working; indeed, were that screw to come loose during the spaceship’s flight, a major tragedy would result.

The *Mishkan*, continues R’ Deblitzki, was a very finely-tuned “machine.” Through it, *Hashem*’s *Shechinah* could reside in this world, but only if it was constructed according to the precise physical and spiritual specifications that Moshe Rabbeinu was shown at *Har Sinai*; otherwise, it would not work. That is why Moshe himself had to assemble it.

R’ Deblitzki adds: Man’s body is also a *Mishkan* / tabernacle capable of having the *Shechinah* reside in it. In order to accomplish this, one must ensure that each limb is performing its job properly [-- for example, that the tongue is being used to speak words of Torah, prayer, and kindness, not *Lashon Ha’ra* or hurtful words; that the eyes are being used in *Mitzvah* performance, not to view sinful things, etc.] If even one small part is “out of place,” the *Shechinah* will be unable to make a home in that body.

(Et L’drosh p.91-92)

“From every man whose heart motivates him you shall take My portion.” (25:2)

R’ Yeshayah Ha’Levi Horowitz z”l (the “*Shelah Hakadosh*”; rabbi of Prague and Yerushalayim; died 1630) asks: Should not the verse have said, “You shall take his--i.e., the donor’s--portion”?

He answers: R’ Shmuel Laniado z”l (Turkey and Syria; died approximately 1610) writes in his work *Kli Chemdah* that *Bnei Yisrael* did not actually possess as much gold as was necessary for the *Mishkan*. However, because they gave with their full hearts, *Hashem* caused their donations to multiply miraculously until the amount of gold sufficed. In effect, therefore, what Moshe was taking from *Bnei Yisrael* was not merely the donor’s portion, it also was “My portion.”

The *Shelah* continues: From this we learn that even when a person lacks the capability to perform a certain *Mitzvah*, he should think in his heart, “I definitely would do it if I could.” In this way, he will get credit as if he did the *Mitzvah*. This, the *Shelah* writes, is called “Serving *Hashem* with the *Yetzer Ha’tov*.”

Conversely, he continues, one of the clauses of the *Yom Kippur* “*Al Chet*” confession says, “For sins I committed with the *Yetzer Ha’ra*!” Are not all sins committed with the *Yetzer Ha’ra*? No, writes the *Shelah*. Most sins are sins of opportunity; they do not involve the *Yetzer Ha’ra* significantly. But, when a person thinks, “If only I would have the opportunity to perform such-and-such a sin,” that is a “Sin committed with the *Yetzer Ha’ra*!”

(*Sha’ar Ha’otiot: Yud, Yetzer Ha’tov* 17)

“They shall make a Sanctuary for Me -- so that I may dwell among them.” (25:8)

A *Midrash* relates that when *Hashem* gave Moshe Rabbeinu this commandment, the latter said, “The heavens and the heavens above the heavens cannot contain You. How can You say that we should make a sanctuary for You?”

Hashem responded: “It is not as you think. Make an enclosure of twenty boards on the north, twenty on the south, and eight on the west, and I will constrict My *Shechinah* into an area of one *Amah* by one *Amah*.” [Until here from the *Midrash*]

R’ Yisrael Eliyahu Weintraub z”l (1932-2010; Bnei Brak, Israel) explains: In reality, Moshe was correct that, even if we could grasp all of the heavens and the heavens above the heavens, we still could not grasp the uniqueness and loftiness of *Hashem*. Nevertheless, *Hashem* created something novel: the possibility that, in the *Mishkan*, we could grasp a little bit of His greatness.

R’ Weintraub continues: If we actually were capable of picturing that *Hashem* “fills the heavens and earth,” we would no longer sense anything except His existence. Our sense of an independent self would disappear. That realization could be achieved in the *Mishkan*.

How *Hashem*, Who is unlimited, can constrict Himself into a limited physical space is beyond our comprehension. Nevertheless, R’ Weintraub observes, we see a parallel wonder in the fact that we have a spiritual soul inside our bodies. On some level, we sense the soul’s existence, yet we have no concept of what it is or how it can be inside of us. The same thing is true of G-d’s presence in our world.

(*Nefesh Eliyahu: Hakdamot* p.93-94)