Building a House for G-d

Rabbi Sammy Bergman

The commandment to build a Mikdash (Sanctuary), a mitzvah described in this week’s parshah, raises a profound philosophical quandary. As presented in Parshat Terumah (Exodus 25:8), the goal of building the Mikdash is to provide a dwelling place for G-d. How can we make any sense of the initiative to construct a house for G-d? To quote King Solomon (Divrei HaYamim 2 2:5), the architect of the First Temple himself, “Who can garner the strength to build Him a house? For the heavens, and the heavens of the heavens can’t sustain Him!”

Medieval rabbis adopted two divergent approaches to addressing this question:

• The Rambam understands that the Mikdash is not a house for G-d’s usage but rather, a house dedicated to the service of G-d. In codifying the commandment, the Rambam defines the Mikdash as a “house of service” (Sefer HaMitzvot, Aseh 20). According to the Rambam’s understanding, when Hashem commands, “And you shall build for Me a sanctuary” (Shemot ibid.), “for Me” means for you to serve Me. Similarly, Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzvah 95) classifies the Mikdash as “a house for the name of G-d; meaning, that we should bring our sacrifices to Him there.”
• In contrast, the Ramban explains that the main goal of the Mikdash is to serve as a place for the Divine Presence to settle. The Ramban posits that for Bnei Yisrael, building the Mishkan was the culmination of a long redemption process. According to the Ramban, to complete the redemption from Egypt, the Jewish people needed to return to the spiritual level of their forefathers. Therefore, after G-d forged a covenant with the Jews at Sinai, the Jews created a sanctuary for G-d to dwell in proximity to them, thereby completing their spiritual journey. (See Ramban’s prologues to Shemot 1 and Shemot 25.)

This difference in perspective also impacts the views of the Rambam and the Ramban regarding the klei haMikdash - the vessels used in the Temple service. The Rambam and the Ramban agree that the requirement to form these vessels is not an independent mitzvah, but they disagree about which mitzvah it is part of:

• According to the Rambam, creating the klei haMikdash is a component of the greater mitzvah to build the Mikdash itself. Designing the tools necessary to perform the service is a part of building a “house of service”. (Introduction to Sefer HaMitzvot, Rule 12)
• Conversely, the Ramban contends that the commandment to construct each vessel is a preparatory stage of the service performed with that vessel. For example, building the menorah is a subcategory of the mitzvah to light the menorah. In the Ramban’s view, the Mikdash itself is primarily a dwelling place for the Divine presence among the Jewish people, and the klei haMikdash, which facilitate the Temple service, serve a different function. (Objections to Sefer HaMitzvot, Aseh 33)

However, the Rambam’s viewpoint requires further investigation. First, if the Rambam truly understands that building the Mikdash is a means to an end, then he shouldn’t count the construction of the Mikdash as an independent mitzvah. It should be viewed as a subcategory of the daily service! Second, the Torah itself states clearly, “They shall make for Me a sanctuary and I shall dwell among them.” (Shemot 25:8) How can the Rambam deny this idea?

I believe that in his description of the mitzvah, the Rambam communicates a profound insight. According to the Rambam, the only way to create a dwelling place for G-d to dwell among us is by consecrating our lives to His service. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Commentary to Shemot 25:8) notes that we refer to the house of G-d as both the Mikdash and the Mishkan. He explains that the idea of Mikdash is our task to dedicate the entirety of our lives to serving Hashem. If we accomplish this task, then Hashem responds by making our Mikdash His Mishkan, and manifesting His presence in our lives. For the Rambam, our responsibility is “They shall make for Me a sanctuary”, to create a “house of service”. We hope that in return Hashem will fulfill His promise of “I shall dwell among them.”

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Our Beet Midrash

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**Journey Through Tanach: Shemuel I, Chapter 19**

**Summary**
Chapter 19 describes the continued breakdown of the relationship between Shaul and David. It begins with Shaul instructing his servants and Yehonatan to kill David. Yehonatan intervenes on David’s behalf by speaking to his father and noting how loyal a subject David has been, and how valuable his service has been to Shaul. In the end Shaul, recalls his order to kill David, instead swearing not to kill him. Things go back to normal for a while, and David continues to be successful in battle against the P’lishtim. (19:1-8)

At some point later, an “evil spirit from G-d” overcomes Shaul, as it had in the previous chapter. He is overpowered by the urge to kill David, and he hurls a spear at him. David only narrowly escapes. Shaul then sends guards to David’s home to hold him until his execution. David is alerted to the plan by his wife Michal, who helps him escape. David runs to Shemuel for help. They settle in the study hall and await Shaul. The king sends three sets of messengers to Shemuel to bring David back for execution. Each group encounters Shemuel presiding over a group of other prophets. The messengers end up prophesying themselves, at which point they forget about Shaul’s command. (19:9-21)

In the end Shaul comes to get David himself, but ends up inspired to prophesy himself. He takes off his royal clothing and remains with David and the other prophets for an entire day. (19:22-24)

**Analysis**
This chapter shows Shaul flitting wildly between different mental states. At first, Yehonatan can combat Shaul’s desire to kill David with rational arguments. In the end, however, the “evil spirit from G-d” overpowers reason and pushes Shaul to seek David’s death again. This pursuit is halted by another sudden mental shift, when Shaul is suddenly lifted to the level of prophecy.

The commentators make sense of this depiction in different ways:

Some understand that the “evil spirit from G-d” was an externally inspired rage, feeding off of Shaul’s jealousy of David, which finally drove him to insanity and action. (See Targum to Shemuel I 18:10.) By this reading, the shifting mental states are caused by G-d, who at first fills Shaul with rage, only to stop it at the last moment with prophecy.

Abarbanel (18:10) understands that Shaul brought the evil spirit upon himself. Seeing David’s rise to prominence, he was reminded of what G-d had said (via Shemuel), that Shaul’s kingship would be taken from him and given to another. Shaul began to suspect that this “other” was David, and his jealousy and internal ruminations eventually led to the “evil spirit” that brought him to seek David’s execution. Thus the “evil spirit from G-d” was one caused by Shaul, but based on what G-d had said. By this reading, our chapter shows Shaul acting in opposition to G-d’s plans, which ultimately fails.

Either way, this chapter continues to underscore the absolute futility of opposing G-d’s plans.

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**Holy Land Halachah: Sounding the Trumpets**

The Torah commands us: “When you are at war in your land against an aggressor who attacks you, you shall sound short blasts on the trumpets, that you may be remembered before Hashem your G-d and be delivered from your enemies.” (Bamidbar 10:9, JPS 1985 tr.) The conditions for the performance of this commandment are put forth in the Talmud. (Taanit, Chapter 3) Blasts are sounded, not only in case of war, but also in times of severe drought, locusts, and pandemics. (Mishnah Taanit 3:5)

The Talmud does not distinguish between Eretz Yisrael and other lands, with regard to this law. However, some authorities have suggested such a distinction as the basis for our historical custom not to sound trumpets in time of need; trumpets apply only in Eretz Yisrael. Furthermore, it has been suggested that this mitzvah is obligatory only when Eretz Yisrael is ruled by Jews, and the majority of the people live in the land. [See Mishnah Berurah 576:1.]

Why should this mitzvah – which seems to relate to the people and not to the land – be limited to times when most of the Jewish people reside in their land and govern it?

To understand this, we may explore an idea proposed by Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (Shiurim L’Zecher Abba Mari, Volume 2, pg. 73). Rabbi Soloveitchik pointed out that in the introduction to the Laws of Fasts, Rambam described the mitzvah of fasting as “crying before G-d at any time of major trouble befalling the people.” However, when presenting the laws themselves, he writes, “There is a biblical commandment to cry and sound the trumpets at any time of major trouble befalling the people.” (Laws of Fasts 1:1) As in other instances where Rambam changed the formulation of the law from the introduction to the legal section of his Mishneh Torah, Rabbi Soloveitchik understood the introduction as describing the goal of the mitzvah, and the legal section as portraying the actual act of the mitzvah. The telos is to cry before G-d; the means is through sounding the trumpets. Rabbi Soloveitchik found support for this view from the fact that Rambam included both the blasting of the trumpets on days of trouble, and at the time of sacrificing, as one mitzvah. (Sefer haMitzvot, Aseh 59) Therefore, the trumpets are a means of communicating with G-d.

The sound of the trumpets for the prayer of the people, then, is the equivalent of the sound of the mouth for the prayer of an individual. The words of the mouth can express the needs and the wants of an individual, but the whole nation can only express itself fully with the most basic of sounds.

Now we can appreciate the reason for the opinion that the mitzvah to sound trumpets is operative only when there is Jewish sovereignty in Israel. The sounding of trumpets in time of trouble is national in its nature. Just as there are no “communal fasts” outside of Eretz Yisrael (see Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 575:10), so there are no national prayer outside of the national land.

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