

Lighting the Flame

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As we study Parshas Terumah, we learn of the keruvim (Shemos 25:20), images of angelic young children with cherubic faces that stood on top of the Aron in the holiest place in the world. The posuk states that they faced each other, "ufneihem ish el ochiv."

However, when referring to the keruvim in the time of Shlomo Hamelech, the posuk (Divrei Hayomim 2-3:13) states that "p'neihem el hakim," they faced the heichol. The Gemara in Bava Basra (99a) points out the contradiction and explains that when the Jewish people are behaving properly – "b'zman she'osim retzono shel Makom" – the keruvim face each other, but when the Jewish people didn't act properly and sinned, the keruvim turned around and faced the wall.

Rav Yitzchok Elchonon Spector, who served as the rov of Kovno but was the rashkebehag to whom all of Klal Yisroel directed their questions of Torah, halacha and askonus, offered a novel explanation of the Gemara. He said that what the Gemara is stating is that the Jewish people are doing what Hashem desires them to do when they are facing each other and caring for each other and helping each other. When a person only cares about himself and his family, and faces the wall rather than face other people, becoming encumbered with their problems and issues, he is not acting the way Hashem wants him to.

Part of being good Jews is caring for each other, not only being concerned about ourselves and our needs.

Last week we read Parshas Mishpotim, dealing with the halachos involving living with other people. This week's parsha deals with the construction of the Mishkon,

the dwelling place of the Shechinah in this world. Introducing the description of this holy place and its construction, the posuk (Shemos 25:2) states, "Veyikchu li terumah – And they should take donations for Me" to build the Mishkon.

The Vilna Gaon explains that the Shechinah was in the hearts of the Bnei Yisroel, but the people needed a place where they could gather together. This was accomplished by "all the hearts," all the people who had the Shechinah beating in their hearts, making heartfelt donations, "asher yidvenu libo."

When people demonstrate that they appreciate what Hashem has given them, they show that there is holiness in their soul. Kedusha seeks to expand and strengthen. When they give of themselves and their possessions, they are able to build a place where kedusha can take hold, gather other sparks of holiness, and create a place of holiness.

I've written previously that to understand this, we can imagine a single person striking a match on a dark winter night. The match lights for a few seconds and then withers away. Suppose two people are together and each one lights a match. The flame is larger, brighter and warmer than when a single match is struck, though it is still quite feeble. The more matches struck together, the more warmth and light there will be.

Every Jew has an individual spark of kedusha, but by itself and when it is cold and dark, the spark can't accomplish much. When Jews join together, each one with his spark, a torch of kedusha erupts and the Shechinah has a place it can visit.

This is the explanation of the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos which states that when two Jews join to study Torah, the Shechinah is among them. This is because they have

combined their sparks to light the world for Torah. In such a place, the Shechinah feels comfortable and joins.

When the entirety of Klal Yisroel joins in contributing "bechol levovom" for a place of kedusha, the Shechinah has found a dwelling place among us in this world.

With this, we can understand a statement of Rabi Akiva: "Ish v'isha zochu Shechinah beineihem – If a man and woman merit, the Shechinah is with them" (Sotah 17a). When a man and a woman marry, if each one is filled with hopes of building a proper Jewish home and has strengthened themselves with good middos and fidelity to Torah and kedusha, they have fostered a place where the Shechinah can feel comfortable.

We no longer have the Mikdosh, but we do have within ourselves sparks of holiness, and if we properly observe halacha, study Torah, and help other people, we can fashion within our hearts and homes a place for the Shechinah.

At the foundation of Yiddishkeit – necessary to excel in Torah – are middos which guide a person's personal conduct and how he deals with others. Just being alone and concerned only about ourselves leaves us with tiny sparks, but in order to flame up into something bigger and better, we have to deal, learn and work with other people.

Hashem told Moshe to accept donations for the Mishkon only from people "asher yidvenu libo," those who want to give. Nobody should be forced to contribute to the construction of the Mishkon.

The Alter of Kelm asks that considering that the call for the construction of the Mishkon came in the desert after being freed from Mitzrayim and receiving the

Torah, who of the Jewish people wouldn't want to contribute to a building for the Shechinah to dwell among them?

How are we to understand that people in their situation would not want to part with a few shekels to help construct a Bais Hashem?

The question is strengthened by the fact that nobody among them had worked hard for the wealth with which they had been blessed. Everything they had was obviously obtained through chesed Hashem, fulfilling the promise made to Avrohom of "V'acharei chein yeitz'u b'rechush gadol" (Bereishis 15:14).

Since none of the Jews of the Dor Hamidbor worked hard for what they had and none of them could convince themselves that their money was a product of "kochi ve'otzem yodi," why would they not willingly give some of it back to the One who enriched them?

Apparently, conceit and selfishness are a part of the human makeup, and anyone who has not benefitted from studying Torah and mussar and developing his middos is unable to part with his possessions to benefit others.

We look back at the people who were enriched by looting the Mitzriyim and wonder how they could not appreciate the source of their wealth. Yet, others from different generations can view us similarly. They can easily say, "Look at the wealth Hashem gave the Jewish people at this time of history. Look at how Hashem removed so many of the impediments to Jewish people being accepted among the general populace and accumulating great wealth." They may wonder about us, "How can it be that everyone didn't realize that Hashem had blessed them? Why didn't they share more of it? Why did they think that they were entitled to ignore the cries of the poor and needy?"

Sure, there are many generous people among us, and it is thanks to them that Torah is built and maintained. It is to their credit that there are so many charitable organizations that help people deal with every conceivable need. Who knows if charity was ever distributed on the level it is now? The amount of tzedakah that is given out in our day has virtually no parallel in any time of history.

When you look at the buildings that have been erected for yeshivos, shuls and other mosdos, think about the people who paid for them. Think about the Holocaust survivors who came here empty-handed and what they accomplished. Think about how they brought up their children and grandchildren to give and build and care about other Jews. And then think about what your role is in the rebirth and rebuilding of Yiddishkeit. Consider what you can do for others. You'll be benefitting yourself, your family, and the entire Torah world.

If you want to merit a share in the Bais Hashem in your area, if you want to merit a Mishkon and a Mikdosh, you have to be a person of nedivus halev, thoughtful generosity. That comes by recognizing that all that we have is a gift and acknowledging that the Torah is made of halachos pertaining to bein adam lachaveiro, not only bein adam laMakom. We have to care about others. We have to seek to benefit fellow Yidden.

A story is told about the Chofetz Chaim, who called an urgent meeting of communal leaders to discuss and solve a pressing matter. Although the Chazon Ish was very young and virtually unknown at the time, he was invited and participated in the gathering. The Chofetz Chaim noticed that the Chazon Ish did not seem like he wanted to be there and was anxiously awaiting the meeting's culmination so he could return to his Gemara.

The Chofetz Chaim turned to the Chazon Ish and said, "You should know that I am aware that were I to lock myself away and only study Torah, I would grow to much greater heights in Torah and avodas Hashem, but our task in this world is not to think only about ourselves. Man wasn't created for himself, but rather to bring satisfaction to Hashem, who desires that we help others. This is compounded when dealing with matters that affect the community."

This is the way tzaddikim and good people conduct themselves.

Many years later, the Chazon Ish, already living in Bnei Brak, was raising money for an important cause. He asked a certain rov to visit a wealthy man in Tel Aviv to solicit a donation from him. The rov didn't want to go and said, "An adam gadol is needed to explain the importance of this cause to him."

The Chazon Ish wasn't impressed with the excuse. He said to the rov, "How does a person become an adam gadol? When he succeeds in a mission such as this one."

When we care about others and give of ourselves to help people, we grow.

An adam gadol is one who understands priorities and acts upon them. MK Shlomo Lorencz was leaving on one of his many fundraising trips abroad and went to the Chazon Ish to bid farewell and ask if there was anything he needed done before he left. The Chazon Ish told him that there was a small yeshiva that was experiencing a specific problem. He asked Rabbi Lorencz to ensure that the issue was resolved before leaving.

Rabbi Lorencz asked what was so important about helping this small yeshiva. He wanted to know if it was something really important that had to be taken care of

before he was to leave. Helping some tiny yeshiva he never even heard of didn't seem to fit the bill.

The Chazon Ish told him, "Yeshivos are of utmost importance. What happens outside of yeshivos is of secondary consideration. Our main focus is on yeshivos, and not only large, famous ones, but every yeshiva, even the smallest ones, even those that are taking their first baby steps, such as this one, which you never heard of. They are paramount, and it is worth devoting time and working to ensure that the issues are cleared up and the talmidim can enter their building and begin learning."

Yeshivos, botei medrash and shuls are what we have today in place of the Mishkon and Mikdosh. We have to appreciate them and seek to spend time there engaged in Torah, tefillah and seeking to become closer to Hashem. We enter them with our small sparks of kedusha and the Shechinah, and we team up with the other people there and their sparks, together lighting a torch of kedusha that brings light to our lives and to the world.

And just as the Mikdosh, in its time, served as a location from where holiness spread out to Klal Yisroel, so too, great tzaddikim are able to accept Hashem's influence, and from them it spreads to those who have properly prepared themselves to accept it.

As we study Parshas Terumah, let us dig beneath the surface and learn its lessons. As we learn the halachos pertaining to the construction of the Mishkon, let us feel its absence and strive to improve the way we conduct ourselves with each other. Let us seek to keep our sparks alive and work to be proper hosts for the Shechinah. Let us contribute to the mikdoshei me'at we have been blessed with and appreciate that they are hosts for the Shechinah.

Let us care about others and do what we can to help other people and the matzav in general. By doing so, we will bring joy to others and to ourselves, and we will bring the world closer to the day when the Bais Hamikdosh will be rebuilt with the coming of Moshiach very soon.