

פרשת תרומה

OVERVIEW

The Revelation at Sinai conveys to the people a full awareness of the task assigned to it by G-d: to become a nation of priests, a holy people. Israel is called upon to follow the divine summons in their social and family lives. The construction of the sanctuary that is the main subject of our Sidrah, is the living symbol of G-d's bond with His nation. The materials needed for the edifice are obtained through voluntary individual contributions. Those destined for the interior include the altar, made of pure gold, the Menorah of seven branches, the table of Shittim wood, and, above all, the holy shrine consisting of three receptacles, the inner and outer ones of gold and between them one made of Shittim wood. The shrine was placed in the most sacred part of the sanctuary.

The Mishkan itself was to be constructed of boards made of precious wood and resting on silver sockets. It was to be covered with multicolored tapestries that were tied to each other by gold clasps. Wooden beams resting on copper sockets surrounded the forecourt of the sanctuary. Curtains suspended from gold bars and hooks connected them.

The Mishkan comprised an area of approximately 250 by 90 yards. It formed the camp's center from which radiated the encampments of the twelve tribes in a harmonious circle.

COMMENTARY

The Ark of the Covenant

Made of precious wood and covered by pure gold, the ark was borne on wooden poles to be carried on the shoulders of the priests. Two gold Cherub figures, rising in carved relief from the cover, unfold their protective wings over the precious contents of the Tabernacle, the tablets of stone on which the ten commandments are engraved. The poles were never to be allowed to be separated from the ark. Their permanent attachment was to symbolize the independence of the Torah that is at no time bound or confined to the site or even the existence of the Sanctuary. In contrast, the poles attached to the other sacred objects, such as the table and Menorah, did not have to be permanently in place but were only used for transport. Israel's table and Israel's Menorah – its

full material and spiritual life – are bound to the soil of the holy land. Israel's Torah is not.

The cover was surmounted by a rim of gold as if to foil any attempt to infringe upon the sanctity and inviolability of G-d's law. - The two Cherubim fulfill a double function. Their wings spread upwards towards the heavens while their faces are inclined downwards onto the cover. They are protectors and guardians of the precious object within, G-d's Torah. This symbolizes Israel's double task of maintaining a close rapport between its people and its G-d and to guard the jewels of purity and justice on earth.

The dualism of these tasks is reflected in the duality of the ark that consisted of two elements (wood and gold) and the duality of the Cherubim as guardians and protectors of G-d's Torah. It becomes clear to every Jew that a synthesis must be established between human endeavor which is subject to changes, weakness and uncertainty (wood) and the divine which is unchangeable, eternal, pure (gold). The wood draws its strength and permanence from the gold that covers it. Only by making the word of G-d the yardstick for all our efforts and aspirations will we be able to rise above our human limitations and reach for the proximity of the Only One.

The Table

In representing the physical aspect of the human existence, the table conveys our longing for a life free of material cares. Twelve loaves are ranged on the table in two stacks of six loaves each. Each loaf in the lower row serves as the base of the one above. Every week, at the onset of the Sabbath, the twelve loaves are exchanged for twelve fresh ones. Clearly the number 'twelve' corresponds to the twelve tribes of Israel. Their proximity and mutual support expressed the idea that social and political problems can be solved on the basis of true brotherhood.

In the same vein the measure of meal used for the baking of each loaf was two tenth which corresponded to double the portion of Manna each person received in the desert. Here again we find the emphasis on brotherly love, on the social responsibility each individual bears for the other. Each stack of loaves hid two golden stands to support it, symbolizing the framework of the divine law that alone can bestow permanence and inner firmness on every social institution.

The Menorah

Without doubt the Menorah represents the other major element of the human existence: Our spiritual and intellectual activity. The very number of the seven arms points to the totality of all spiritual knowledge and its moral application. The center light, leaning slightly towards the Holy of Holies, unites and draws to itself the six adjoining lights. Is this not symbolic of the six days in the week that receive their inspiration from the luminous brilliance of the Sabbath, the seventh light?

The central stem with its one center light represents the spirit striving upwards, towards the knowledge and service of G-d. The six arms with their six lights represent our efforts and actions that are directed to the physical world. On each of the six arms were three cups, one knob and one flower. At the base is the cup, a container that collects and absorbs knowledge, wisdom and understanding (הכמה ובינה). The second stage is the bud, or knob, the inner, invisible maturing of the idea that develops the seeds for active deeds and spiritual growth (עצה וגבורה). Finally the blossom, the crowning flower, the harmonious product of the essential elements from which flow the knowledge and fear of G-d (דעת ויראה).

The Menorah is built of solid gold, through and through, a substance that symbolizes unchanging firmness and timelessness while its form suggests growth and development. The spirit of Torah suffers no comparison, no changing. It is immutable, supremely independent, eternal.

(A notable detail: the blossom is shaped like the blossom of an almond tree which is distinguished in that it is spring's first blooming tree and also brings forth its blossoms before its leaves. The spirit of Torah, guarantor of mankind's continuity (the blossom, bearer of the reproductive germ) is the essence of life itself and of the existence of every individual (the leaf provides the essential nourishment for the tree's survival).

The Structure

The Ohel Moed was composed of wooden poles joined firmly together around three sides by crossbars and leaving an open entrance on the east side. This entrance was separated from the forecourt by a curtain.

An invisible tiebeam ran along the three sides providing a unifying element for the entire structure. It was complemented by four visible bars, two on the outside and two on the inside. This may be an allusion to the twelve tribes who were descended from four foremothers and a single forefather, Yaakov. The nation is divided into four categories: the spiritual and political leadership on one hand, farmers and tradesmen on the other. Each branch was represented by a leading tribe: Levi, the spiritual leader; Yehuda, the political leader; Zevulun, the experienced merchant and explorer of the seas, and Yissachar, the Jewish farmer. Their diversity is only on the surface for they are all united by the inner hold that binds them together as Yaakov's spiritual heirs.

The Altar

The altar rises majestically in the forecourt of the Sanctuary, Its walls rest on a massive mound of earth forming a cube which is crowned by a platform. This is the site where Israel offers its sacrifices. The square form of the altar is essential (מעכב). We may compare the squareness with the containers of the Tefillin, small cubes of equally perfect dimension. The altar is the place where, symbolically, man's body and soul are sanctified and elevated to the realm of godliness. Tefillin that envelop the arm and head symbolize our determination to dedicate all our active and intellectual functions to the service of G-d. Altar and Tefillin have a common purpose: they are to make us conscious of our task to become, as it were, G-d's partners in His universal plan. There is no more telling symbol of man's free and deliberate will than the rectangular shape. It reflects the freedom of the human purpose and its mastery over the material world (טהרה). In contrast to the perfect cube, the curved or circular shape predominates in all forms created by organic forces. The circle, the curve, appertains to subjection, to lack of free will (היפך הטהרה).

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