

Coming Home (Edited Transcript)

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The shul is such an important part of Jewish life. Its roots can be traced back to our parsha, which discusses the mitzvah to build the Mishkan, the sanctuary in the desert, which itself was a prototype for what would later become the Beit HaMikdash – the holy Temple in Jerusalem. The Gemara (Megillah 29a) cites a verse in the Prophets that talks about a Mikdash Me'at, a 'miniature sanctuary', and explains that this refers to the houses of prayer and learning that exist throughout the world. And so, if we can understand the essential nature of the Mishkan (and the Beit HaMikdash), we can gain insight into the role of the shul in today's times.

The Book of Redemption

In order to do so we actually have to take one step back and understand the structure of the second book of the Chumash, the book of Shemot (Exodus). The Ramban (1194-1270), has another name for Shemot – Sefer HaGeulah, the 'Book of Redemption'.

The Ramban views Shemot through the prism of three major events – the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai and the building of the Mishkan. He describes this as a three-fold process of redemption, beginning with G-d delivering the Jewish people from the physical exile in Egypt, then moving to the Jewish people's spiritual liberation at Mount Sinai, and culminating in the building of the Mishkan – the point at which G-d brings His Shechinah, His 'Divine Presence', to rest among the Jewish people. As the verse in our parsha says, 'Make for me a sanctuary, and I will dwell amongst them [i.e. the Jewish people].' This final stage of the liberation process sees the Jewish people reconnect with G-d and with their spiritual essence on an intimate level.

And so, says the Ramban, the Book of Shemot is all about redemption in the fullest sense. A redemption that goes beyond the mere physical liberation alluded to by the name 'Exodus', and which encompasses the great spiritual deliverance of the Jewish people which accompanies the giving of the Torah and the building of the Mishkan.

Beyond a building

Analysing the verse, 'Make for me a sanctuary, and I will dwell amongst them', Rashi (1040-1105) explains this 'sanctuary' to refer to the actual physical structure whose construction our parsha goes on to delineate in extraordinary detail.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) has a different interpretation. He says the verse refers not just to the construction of a physical building, but to the creation of a mikdash, a place of holiness, in our own lives. And how do we carve out a sanctuary for G-d to dwell in, in this world? By living in accordance with all the principles and precepts of the Torah. If we live with kindness and compassion, with wisdom and spirituality, with scrupulous observance of the mitzvot – then we create a dwelling place for the Divine Presence right here on earth.

According to this interpretation, we understand that the giving of the Torah is not just the transmission of a theoretical text to the Jewish people, but the dynamic expression and realisation of that text in our day-to-day lives. By living a life of sanctity and goodness, we bring the Divine Presence among us, and complete the process of redemption.

But what then is the role of the actual Mishkan, the physical building itself? Says Rabbi Hirsch, it is to inspire us to live a life of holiness. The Holy Ark, the Menorah, the Golden Table – all of these elements symbolise and encapsulate the different ways in which the values of the Torah can inspire us to live sanctified lives. To illustrate this, he points out how at times in history when the Jewish people were no longer connected to the values of the Torah, the Temple was destroyed because it wasn't fulfilling its purpose. The purpose of the Temple was to bring people closer to Torah and it needed to fulfill that lofty goal in order to justify its

existence.

In today's times, when there is no Temple, the shul performs precisely that role. It's not simply a place where we express our Jewishness; it's a place to be inspired so that we can become great Jews outside of shul. Shul is a springboard to inspire us to connect to G-d and His Torah so that when we leave shul we can be people of integrity, of spirituality, of learning, of sanctity, of good deeds. Rabbi Hirsch emphasises in many of his writings that the focal point of Jewish life should be the home, the workplace, or wherever we happen to be involved at any given time, and the shul is where we fuel up on the energy and inspiration to live our lives this way.

A house of prayer

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (1903-1993), has an entirely different way of looking at the verse, "Make for me a sanctuary, and I will dwell amongst them." He understands it specifically in the context of the mitzvah of prayer. He says the mikdash, and its latter-day iteration, the shul, is a place to really connect with Hashem, and, in a sense, to "come home".

In a powerful speech he gave in the 1970s, Rav Soloveitchik spoke of how the Jewish people exemplify the concept of exile. No other nation in the history of the world has lived in state of continual exile. There are peoples that go into exile and within two or three generations are absorbed into the culture in which they landed up. But the Jewish people, almost 2000 years after having been expelled from Israel and scattered across the world, have remained in exile, stubbornly retaining our unique national identity.

At the same time, explains Rav Soloveitchik, there's also an existential exile which is part of the universal human condition. As human beings, we all feel a sense of homelessness born of our vulnerability and a certain helplessness. He puts it this way: "Man is vulnerable, exposed to disease and death. The beast is similarly vulnerable, but he is not homeless because he is unaware of his existential situation." He goes on to quote from King Solomon, who says, "The more wisdom, the more pain." When we see the world for what it is - when we realise how vulnerable and frail we are and the temporary nature of human life - then we feel, in a sense, alienated and in exile in this world. Furthermore, says Rav Soloveitchik, the human being is besieged by a "restlessness and boredom" - "searching without finding, yearning without achieving" - thereby compounding this sense of rootlessness and alienation.

So what do we do? What is the solution to our dislocation? Where do we go to find a refuge from our homelessness? Rav Soloveitchik's answer: the Mishkan/Beit Hamikdash, and in today's world - the shul. When we enter the shul, we come home. The shul is the place where we reconnect with our Creator, through the process of prayer. In doing so, we soothe those feelings of homelessness, because through kindling our connection to G-d, we feel that we have roots in this world and that we aren't just adrift in a sea of existential nothingness. Through prayer, we feel connected to the One who is Eternal, and who loves us and cares for us, and in the process, we reconnect with our own eternal selves.

Rav Soloveitchik explains that one of the reasons people become disenchanted with shul in today's times is that they don't see it as a place of connection. He remarks how, in pre-war Europe, Jews would walk into shul and there would be that sense of coming home, of putting all of one's troubles aside and feeling held in G-d's warm embrace.

"Why do we need a synagogue at all?", he says. "Why not pray in the field? We do not need a house, we need a home. The synagogue should not be called the house of G-d but rather the home of G-d, and more accurately the home of man. G-d is not homeless, man is homeless. G-d feigned homelessness in order to induce man to build a home."

Coming home

And so for Rav Soloveitchik, the verse, "Make for me a sanctuary, and I will dwell amongst them", ostensibly about building a home for G-d, is really about creating a home for man. This idea is elucidated in an interesting passage in the Talmud. The Gemara in Berachot states: "Whoever has a shul in their city and doesn't enter to pray there is called a bad neighbour", and then cites this verse from our parsha as textual support.

The Maharal of Prague explains in his commentary on this Gemara that the shul is a place where we connect. We connect with the people who are part of our community and we connect with G-d. And to be a bad neighbour is to disconnect from those around us, and to disconnect from G-d Himself. This ties in with Rav Soloveitchik's idea of the shul as a place where we connect to G-d and find refuge from our homelessness and our alienation.

The point is driven home powerfully by the concluding passage in the Gemara, "And furthermore? he [who disconnects from shul] causes himself and his children to go into exile." What kind of exile are we talking about here? Clearly, based on our discussion, it's not just a physical exile, it's an emotional, physical exile. An exile of the soul.

As we make our way through this world, we crave connection with G-d, with the people around us, with our own souls. And that connection is sparked through the very powerful mitzvah of prayer. By praying "with love, with fervour, with sincerity" we bring Hashem's Presence into our world and we find our home.