

D'var Torah: Parashat Terumah

by Akiva Wagner - Thursday, February 07, 2019

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This week the Chief Rabbi explains the purpose of our shuls.

What is the purpose of our shuls?

At the beginning of Parashat Terumah we are given a list of key ingredients used in the 'Mishkan' -the Sanctuary, and later in the Temple. One of them was 'Shemen Lameor' – oil for illumination.

In that word, 'Lameor', there is a missing 'Vav'. It is an example of 'Malei V'Chaser'. According to tradition if a letter is missing, it means that something there was diminished.

The Baal Haturim, bringing us the Gemara in Masechet Menachot (Daf Pei Vav Amud Beit) tells us that the light inside the Sanctuary, and later in the Temple, was diminished because this was not regular light but spiritual light.

Now we can understand the Rambam's explanation for kindling the Menorah twice a day – at night-time and in the morning. We can understand at night-time because it is dark but why was the Menorah kindled at day time? It was because it gave spiritual light to our people.

When King Solomon built his Temple, the First Book of Kings (chapter 6) tells us something about the shape of the windows of the Temple – they were narrow on the inside and broad on the outside.

Now, you would have thought that just the opposite would be the case. After all, windows are there in order to bring the light from outside so that those on the inside can see.

The reason is the spiritual light within the Temple, which was intended to illuminate the world around it. I believe that there is a powerful message here about Judaism – that we need to reach outwards. We need to guarantee that the beauty of our faith will touch the hearts and minds of those around us so that we can be a genuine light unto the nations.

There is a further important message relating to the 'Mikdash Me'at' – the small Temple – that is how we refer to shuls that we have in our communities today.

What is the purpose of the shul? It is not a building within which we are seeking to restrict the presence of Hashem to exist only inside it. Quite the contrary. It is from this building that we want to broaden out the experiences we have within it, so that wherever we go, we can take the presence of Hashem with us.

The light that is within our shuls, our spirituality, our community spirit, our friendship, the warmth of that experience needs to illuminate the world around us.

So, what is the purpose of our shuls? Ironically, it is not so much that what happens within them but it is the inspiration and the influence the shul provides to everything outside, around them.

Shabbat Shalom.

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