

# ***Parashat Terumah***

## **The Temple in Our Midst**

Nearly two millennia have passed since the Second Temple, the focal point of Jewish life, was reduced to rubble. Nevertheless, God promised “I shall be a minor Temple (טַמְּדֵן אֶתְכֶם) for them” (Ezekiel 11:16) in exile. What does this mean? The Sages tell us it refers to the synagogues and study halls that thankfully heavily dot the map of the Jewish Diaspora.<sup>1</sup> The Rambam understood this to be no mere homily but a halachic reality. He notably extended the biblical prohibition against destroying the Temple recorded in Deuteronomy 12:4 to synagogues and study halls.<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik deduced from this that there is indeed a profound link between the ultimate house of worship and our own humble houses of worship, a link reflected in Halachah.

### *The Source of the Temple’s Sanctity*

The first step in precisely defining the nature of the synagogue’s sanctity is to understand the source of the Temple’s own holiness. According to the Ramban, “the main intent of the *Mishkan* was to have a place for the divine presence to rest, namely, the ark, as it says, ‘I shall meet with you there and speak to you from on top of the cover’ (Exodus 25:22).”<sup>3</sup>

The difficulty is that according to tradition the ark was absent from the Second Temple, so did it lack the full sanctity of the First Temple? The Rambam wrote: “When Shlomo built the Temple and foresaw that it would eventually be destroyed, he built a chamber below, in the labyrinthine depths, in which to hide the ark.”<sup>4</sup> The Rav explained that while the ark did not rest in the Holy of Holies during the Second Commonwealth, it was still physically located at the Temple Mount, albeit deep beneath the ground. Therefore, it continued to radiate its holiness onto the magnificent structure above.<sup>5</sup>

The ark as the Temple’s true source of sanctity has halachic implications for the “minor Temple” today. A synagogue without an ark containing a Torah scroll, the Rav argued, does not possess the full status of a synagogue.<sup>6</sup> Praying with a quorum where there is no Torah scroll, such as outdoors, discharges the obligation of *tefilah be-tzibur*, public prayer, but lacks the framework of holiness provided by the synagogue.

### *A Temple in Miniature*

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Megilah* 29a.

<sup>2</sup> *Minyan ha-Mitzvot ha-Katzar*, *lo ta’aseh* §65.

<sup>3</sup> Ramban on Exodus 25:2.

<sup>4</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Beit ha-Bechirah*, 4:1.

<sup>5</sup> Schachter, *Eretz ha-Tzevi*, 91.

<sup>6</sup> Genack, *Shi’urei ha-Rav*, 314.

The sanctity of the synagogue being modeled on that of the Temple leads to a number of halachic requirements governing its structure and ambiance:

(1) *Location of the bimah*: The *Chatam Sofer* ruled that the platform on which the Torah is read, the *bimah*, must be in the middle of the synagogue rather than at the front, as was the contemporary practice of nascent Reform: “Since our *bimah* is like the inner altar, it is fitting to place it in the middle of the synagogue to make it as similar to the Temple as possible. One should not change our miniature Temple.”<sup>7</sup>

(2) *Hanging of the ark curtain*: In today’s synagogues, the Torah scrolls in the ark are separated from the rest of the room by a curtain that is usually lavishly embroidered with a verse or images. Since our ark represents that of the *Mishkan* and Temple, it requires the same dividing curtain: “you shall cover the ark with the curtain” (Exodus 40:3).<sup>8</sup>

(3) *Necessity of gender separation*: Although we often associate gender separation in the synagogue as necessary for modesty and appropriate decorum for prayer, there is another fundamental reason for it. The Rambam states: “The women’s courtyard [of the Temple] was surrounded by balconies, so that women could look from above and the men from below without intermingling.”<sup>9</sup> The Maharam Schick adds that what was true of the Temple must apply to the synagogue.<sup>10</sup>

The Rav appealed to history (in addition to Halachah) when declaring the *mechitzah*, the barrier separating the sexes, an absolute requirement, in contrast to those denominations of Judaism who were doing away with it:

[T]he separation of the sexes in the synagogue derives historically from the Sanctuary, where there were both a Court of Women and a Court of Israelites. ...the people of Israel have never violated this sacred principle. [...]

It would seem to me that our remembrance of history alone should keep us from imitating today the practice of primitive Christianity almost 1900 years ago.<sup>11</sup>

(4) *Elevated modesty*: Many observant, married women who do not usually cover their hair do put on some covering upon entering the synagogue for prayer. Rabbi Hershel Schachter explains that there is a real basis for this practice. As a miniature Temple, the synagogue is a place designated for the resting of the *Shechinah*, the divine presence, and thus entails a heightened regard for modesty. *Parashat Terumah* says that the curtain at the entrance of the *Mishkan* was folded over (Exodus 26:9). Rashi likens this to “a modest bride whose face is veiled.”<sup>12</sup> This seems to indicate that modesty is essential for God’s presence to be manifest.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> *Shut Chatam Sofer, Orach Chayim, §28.*

<sup>8</sup> *Chumash Mesoras Harav, 2:347.*

<sup>9</sup> *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Beit ha-Bechirah, 5:9*

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Schachter, *Eretz ha-Tzevi*, 93.

<sup>11</sup> Soloveitchik, *Community, Covenant and Commitment*, 134.

<sup>12</sup> Rashi on Exodus 26:9.

<sup>13</sup> Schachter, *Eretz ha-Tzevi*, 96.

(5) *Planting trees in the courtyard*: The Rav cites the position of the great Talmudist Rabbi Akiva Eger, which prohibits the planting of trees on the premises of a synagogue based on the biblical prohibition against planting trees in the Temple precincts: “You shall not plant for yourselves an Asherah tree—any tree—near the altar of Hashem your God” (Deuteronomy 16:21).<sup>14</sup>

(6) *Strolling in the synagogue*: Rabbi Yosef Caro rules in his *Shulchan Aruch* that one may not act frivolously in a synagogue. One example is “do not stroll in them.”<sup>15</sup> In the synagogue, one must maintain not only decorum but reverence for its sanctity. Apparently staying put is a perennial problem, as Rav Chaim Brisker made the following remark about one of the miracles associated with the Temple: “They stood crowded, yet prostrated with ample space.”<sup>16</sup> Even the first part, the standing still, quipped Rav Chaim, was miraculous.

### *Not Quite a Temple*

Though it is clear that the synagogue is like the Temple in many respects, of course the two should not be conflated. The Rav captures the qualitative distinction in the following evocative manner. God refers to the Temple as “My house” (Isaiah 56:7), and David ha-Melech likewise calls it “the house of God” (Psalms 27:4). If the Temple is God’s palatial home, when we cross its threshold awe and dread should overpower us. God instructs us to “fear My Temple” (Leviticus 26:2).

The synagogue, on the other hand, is our communal home. The Talmud makes the comparison explicit: “[The synagogue] is like one’s house. Just as one objects to walking through the house as a shortcut but not to spitting or wearing shoes, the same is true of the synagogue.”<sup>17</sup> It is into this communal home that we invite God, so to speak. “When the Holy One enters a synagogue and does not find ten men there, He immediately becomes angry.”<sup>18</sup> The synagogue therefore deserves our respect, but not fear.

In a lecture, Rabbi Menachem Genack presented this distinction of the Rav and mentioned an intriguing practical ramification. Both Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and the Rav were asked their opinion regarding bringing a seeing-eye dog into a synagogue during prayer services. Since the Talmud says that Rabbi Imi permitted scholars to enter the study hall with a donkey, Rabbi Feinstein felt it would be certainly permitted in this circumstance.<sup>19</sup> The Rav argued that just as we do not bring a dog into a Jewish home, we should hold to the same standard for a synagogue. Apparently, the Rav could not fathom that a Jewish home would welcome a dog.<sup>20</sup> However, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, the Rav’s son-in-law, taught

---

<sup>14</sup> Genack, *Shi’urei ha-Rav*, 300. Interestingly, Rav Chaim Brisker, the Rav’s grandfather, permitted such planting in Brisk.

<sup>15</sup> *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim*, 151:1.

<sup>16</sup> *Pirkei Avot*, 5:7.

<sup>17</sup> *Berachot* 63a.

<sup>18</sup> *Berachot* 6b.

<sup>19</sup> *Igerot Moshe, Orach Chayim*, vol. 1, §45.

<sup>20</sup> Rabbi Menachem Genack, “Chidushei Torah on the Approach of Rav Soloveichik zt”l to the Sanctity of Beit Haknesses and Beit HaMedrash,” <https://outorah.org/p/33420/> (accessed March 14, 2021).

that the Rav permitted bringing a guide dog into the synagogue because a person *would* allow such a dog to enter one's home when accompanying a blind man.<sup>21</sup> In both versions of the Rav's ruling, one can see that the analysis rests on a comparison between the synagogue and the home, and what constitutes proper respect for both.

### *Exploring the Rav's Insight*

Regarding the practice of *nefilat apayim*, resting the head on the arm when reciting the *tachanun* supplication, the Rema rules: "Some say that we only do *nefilat apayim* in a place where there is an ark containing a Torah scroll... and this is the accepted practice."<sup>22</sup> Rabbi Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky recorded an exception to this:

In Jerusalem, the custom is to do *nefilat apayim* even in a structure that does not contain a Torah scroll, and even in a place that is not regularly used for prayer. Doing *nefilat apayim* only in a place that contains a Torah scroll is based on a biblical allusion, "And he fell on his face toward the ground before the ark of God" (Joshua 7:6). Since Jerusalem's holiness is everlasting, it is tantamount to being in the presence of God's ark.<sup>23</sup>

Applying the Rav's logic, if the ark beneath the Temple Mount infused the Second Temple with its sanctity, perhaps its presence at the spiritual center of Jerusalem extends its sacred presence to the entire city. Moreover, according to the Rambam the entire city of Jerusalem is considered to be the *machaneh*, the camp that surrounds the Temple Mount.<sup>24</sup> When one prays in Jerusalem, then, one can be said to be praying in the presence of the original ark, and one must do *nefilat apayim*.

The beautiful notion that the entire city of Jerusalem is an extension of the Temple appears in a verse recited during the Hallel prayer: "In the courts of the House of God, in your midst, Jerusalem, Hallelujah" (Psalms 116:19). Commenting on this verse, both the Radak and Don Yitzchak Abarbanel suggest that because the holiness of the city of Jerusalem results from the ark's presence, it is most appropriate that God be praised in the midst of this holy city.

---

<sup>21</sup> Rabbi Howard Jachter, "Halachic Perspectives on Pets," *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* XXIII (Spring 1992; Pesach 5752), [http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/english/halacha/jachter\\_1.htm](http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/english/halacha/jachter_1.htm) (accessed March 14, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Rema on *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim*, 131:2.

<sup>23</sup> *Eretz Yisrael*, 1:9.

<sup>24</sup> *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Beit ha-Bechirah*, 7:11.