

How Lavish a Shul Do You Want?

In the United States we often have an “edifice complex.” We want synagogues to be bigger and more elaborate, with more and more donations for capital campaigns. At the same time, we know that bigger does not always mean better. Many synagogues today wish they had a smaller building that was easier to take care of.

We see in this week’s reading that our ancestors were the same in being directed to have embellishment. They were told to make an ark out of acacia wood, which needed to be imported, as well as overlaid with pure gold. The ark cover also needed to be overlaid with gold. Four gold rings needed to be attached to the four feet of the ark. The poles needed to be made out of acacia wood and overlaid with gold. The cherubim outside the ark needed to be made from hammered gold.

Why does everything need to be ornate and elaborate? Why not take a more simple approach? An obvious answer is because this is God’s house so it needs to be as elaborate and high-end as possible. Rashi comments that the *mishkan* “symbolizes the crown of royalty” and

“represents wealth and greatness.”¹ Rashi comments further on the requirement for hammered work for the Menorah “it shall not be made of segments; it must all be made from a single piece of metal.”² This is much harder to do and requires the best craftsman in order to construct it.

Ever since the story of Cain and Abel we understand the importance of giving G-d the best that we have. We needed the best craftsmen and the most expensive materials in order to build a home fit for The Almighty One. As each synagogue is considered a מקדש מעט, a miniature sanctuary, and our contemporary synagogues were constructed in a similar way: the best craftsmen, the most majestic structures and the most expensive materials one can afford. We were awed by the clergy team from on high, as if they were in the heavens. At the same time, many today, especially of my generation, are not impressed by these majestic structures of yesteryear, questioning their value. If G-d is

¹ ד"ה וצפית אותו זהב טהור Rashi on Genesis 25:24

² ד"ה ועשית מגרת זהב טהור Rashi on Genesis 25:31

everywhere, and we can connect at any place, why do we need such a “pretty room”?

When I was a rabbinical student, I prayed at independent minyanim which were located in church basements. I remember someone covering the image of Jesus with a sweater before *Kabbalat Shabbat* services at *Kol Zimrah*. Although it was not a beautiful space, I got such intense feelings of spirituality based on the people I was praying with and the prayer experience itself. At the same time, I feel the inherent beauty in praying in a gorgeous space like this. In my experience, it’s the people and the music which together create the sense of beauty more than the structure itself.

The challenge is that prayer spaces have been set by those who came before us, so how do we create a prayer space that speaks to younger people? I would argue that more than the space it’s what we do that attracts people. If we do not have a worship product that touches people’s souls, it does not matter how gorgeous the prayer space is. Conversely, the more inspirational the prayer experience, the more

people will come despite what the room might look like. Today it might feel that our gifts from the heart matter more than the previous generation's gifts from the pocket which endowed such a beautiful Sanctuary.

When we think about what our Terumot, our personal contributions, will be, let us consider gifts from the spirit as much if not more so than gifts from the pocket. Let us appreciate our beautiful prayer space, which is not "free" to maintain but may we also consider how we can shape our prayer experience to be welcoming and inviting to those of all ages. *Ken Yhi Ratzon*, may it be our will to do so.