

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Terumah
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Terumah – The kedusha of a shul

For the next five weeks, the focus of the weekly Parshiyot will be on the building of the Mishkan, the precursor to the Bet Hamikdash. Terumah and Tetzaveh contain Hashem’s instructions to Moshe as to how to build the Mishkan and its utensils. Ki Tisa interrupts the theme by focusing on the sin of the Golden Calf. Vayakhel and Pekudai then return to theme by describing the actual building of the Mishkan and the fashioning of the various utensils that were used in the Mishkan.

These days, due to our sins, we no longer have the Mishkan or the Bet Hamikdash, so it can be difficult for us to relate to these Parshiyot. But we do still have a מקדש מעט – “Mikdash Me’at” – the small sanctuary:

“Therefore, say; So said Hashem, Elokim: Although I have removed them far off among the nations and although I have scattered them in the lands, I have become for them a minor sanctuary (Mikdash Me’at) in the lands where they have come.” (Yechezkel 11:16)

The commentators explain that Mikdash Me’at refers to the shul and the Bet Midrash (house of Torah study).¹ These holy places contain a small remnant of the kedusha of the Bet Hamikdash.² Therefore, for the next five weeks, as we focus on the Mishkan in the weekly Parasha, we will focus on the shul – its holiness and some of the relevant halachot that apply.

The shul has always been a central part of Jewish communities, wherever they are found around the world. In the past couple of years, our shuls have been taken away from us for periods of time due to the pandemic. If we face suffering, the Gemara³ teaches us that we should examine our actions. Suffering often (but not always) comes about as a result of transgressions. We do not know why the world was hit with Corona. It would be entirely inappropriate for us to suggest that the pandemic was caused by a particular sin or inappropriate behaviour. However, if we examine our actions, we may find an area that can be improved. Even though that shortfall may not be “the cause” of our current worldwide suffering, at least we will have used the suffering as an impetus to improve our ways, and that can only be positive.

One of the negative results of the pandemic is that we have been forced out of our shuls. What can we learn from this? Perhaps the following analogy might assist. When a teenager gets his driving licence, his parents may let him use the car. However this is a big responsibility. If the teenager demonstrates that he is a responsible and safe driver, then his parents will continue to allow him to have access to the car. But if he does not use the car responsibly then his parents will take away that privilege until he can act more maturely. Perhaps we have been somewhat irresponsible in the way that we behaved in our shuls. A ‘Mikdash Me’at’ requires respect and there are a number of important

¹ See for example Rashi to this pasuk who refers to shuls.

² Actually, a Bet Midrash has a higher level of kedusha than a shul. However these days the distinction has become somewhat blurred. We use the Bet Midrash also as a place to pray and we use the shul also as a place to learn Torah. This blurring of the distinction impacts the relevant halachot. The distinction between the Bet Midrash and the shul and the halachic ramifications of that distinction is beyond the scope of this article.

³ Brachot 5a.

halachot that apply to how we behave in a shul. The fact that our shuls were 'taken away from us' should encourage us to reflect on how we can act more appropriately whilst in shul.

The Gemara⁴ teaches that we may not make a shul into a *kappandria*. For those who are unfamiliar with ancient Greek, the main understanding of the term *kappandria* is a 'short cut'.⁵ In other words, if a shul has two entrances, one should not enter one entrance to exit the other entrance in order to shorten their path. Acting in such a manner is disrespectful to the shul. However, the Gilyonai Hashas⁶ understands that *kappandria* means a gathering place. According to this opinion, we cannot use a shul as a place to gather for conversation and the like. Even though the Shulchan Aruch rules like the first opinion,⁷ the second opinion teaches us an eye-opening lesson.

The shul is often used as the hub of the Jewish community.⁸ Some people like to mention that "Bet Kneset" literally means "a house of gathering" and therefore it is appropriate to socialise there. However, as we will learn in the coming weeks, there are a number of halachot that curtail our behaviour in shul, such as talking, eating and light-headed behaviour. How can we understand these halachot in light of the role of the shul as a communal centre?

The answer may lie in the Gemara⁹ which teaches: "A person should always enter two doorways into the shul". A number of explanations are given for this teaching:

- **Distance** – one should walk at least the distance of two doorways (a minimal amount of eight tefachim which is less than a metre) into the shul before they start davening. If one sits right next to the door it gives the appearance that being in shul is burdensome and they can't wait to leave. (If one's regular seat is by the doorway this would not be a concern).
- **Time** – one should not rush to daven as soon as they enter shul. Rather one should pause at least the amount of time it takes to walk through two doorways (a minimal amount of a few seconds). This allows you to gather your thoughts and hopefully concentrate better on your prayers.
- **Public domain** – some explain that the halacha only applies if the shul opens up into the public domain. The concern is that one will look outside and thereby become distracted from his tefillot. Therefore, if the door to the shul does not open to the street there is no concern.

The Shulchan Aruch¹⁰ rules that it is best to follow all three opinions. But the Bach¹¹ understands that we should literally enter into a shul through two physical doors. The Bach states that therefore Jewish communities have the custom to build a hall or foyer that one walks through before entering the shul proper. The Magen Avraham¹² and the Mishnah Berurah¹³ cite this as the common practice.

This provides a simple solution to our dilemma. The typical shul has at least two separate areas – a place for davening and a foyer/hall/kiddush room. We can certainly use our shul as a place to gather and socialise, a place to mix with fellow Jews in our community and a safe place to escape from the influences of the culture around us. However the appropriate place to do so is in the foyer or hall. If

⁴ This appears in Brachot 62b and also in Megilla 29a.

⁵ There is actually a discussion as to whether the word is derived from Greek, Roman or Aramaic.

⁶ Rav Yosef Engel 1859-1920.

⁷ Orach Chaim 151:5.

⁸ This phenomenon is much more pronounced outside of Israel. We can suggest that the reason is as follows. When a Jewish community is surrounded by non-Jewish people, the role of the shul becomes more important in preserving Jewish identity. In Israel, especially in small towns and yishuvim, the whole community is Jewish, so the shul becomes less important to one's sense of community. In the large cities in Israel, the role of the shul generally seems to be more important than in the smaller yishuvim, but still less than in the Diaspora.

⁹ Brachot 8a.

¹⁰ Orach Chaim 90:20.

¹¹ Rabbi Yoel ben Shmuel Sirkis (1561 - 1640).

¹² OC Siman 90, seif katan 35.

¹³ Siman 90, seif katan 61.

one wants to chat with their friend while at shul, they can do so gezunterhait (with good health), but they just need to step outside and make use of the foyer! This way the shul itself remains kadosh, quiet and a true sanctuary for Hashem's Presence.

As a child, I vividly remember our school trip to the Australian Parliament House in Canberra. The tour guide took us to the public gallery where we could see the main floor of the Parliament where the politicians would sit and engage in debate. The tour guide spoke in a hushed tone and we were all afraid to breathe. On another occasion, when travelling through the UK, I remember having the opportunity to actually touch the hallowed grass of Lords cricket ground!¹⁴

These places are revered because the people who visit choose to behave in a respectful manner. If they began to act in a disrespectful manner, the sanctity of these places would quickly dissipate. We can learn this lesson and apply it when stepping into the places where Hashem's Shechinah is present. But it is up to us. The kedusha of our shuls will only be manifest to the degree that we choose to behave in an appropriate manner there. This is an awesome responsibility.

May we treat our shuls with respect and merit to have Hashem's Presence in our Mikdash Me'at.

Let's try something this week:

1. Think of a room that is meaningful to you personally in which you would act in a respectful manner – maybe it's a court room, your boss's office, the school principal's office, the President's private office. Think about how you would feel and behave when standing in that room.
2. Now try to compare that feeling and behaviour with your experience in a shul. Try to match or beat that feeling and behaviour when you step into shul. Shouldn't a Mikdash Me'at where a minyan prays before Hashem's Presence demand at least as much respect?

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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¹⁴ With apologies to our dear readers that are not from a Commonwealth country. I won't even try to explain the significance.