



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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Two Witnesses

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Terumah

Two Witnesses

This week marks the anniversary of the Arab Spring in Egypt—the uprising that eventually overthrew Hosni Mubarak, a lifelong dictator.

While we all hope and pray that the changes in the Middle East will ultimately be good for the Jews in general and Israel in particular, we can always find a connection between current events and the current Torah portion of the week.

And this holds true for the Parshah of Terumah, this week’s portion, too.

In this week’s Parshah, we learn about the commandment, “And they shall make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst” (Shmos 25:8). G-d asks the Jewish Nations to build Him a house through which He’ll be able to dwell among the Jews.

And the Torah tells us what building materials are needed for this Mishkan, the Tabernacle: “And this is the offering that you shall take from them: gold, silver, and copper.” The Torah then continues listing several other items until it gets to “atzei shitim”—acacia or cedar wood (there are different opinions)—from which the wall beams of the Mishkan were to be built.

Rashi asks, “And from where did they have them in the desert?” Where did they get acacia trees in the middle of the desert? All the other materials are not a question: gold, silver and all the rest they had taken with them from Egypt. But wood? Trees don’t grow in the desert!

So Rashi answers something very interesting: “Yaakov Avinu foresaw with Divine inspiration that the Jewish Nation was destined to build the Mishkan in the desert, and so he brought cedars to Egypt and planted them, and he charged his sons to take them with them when they left Egypt” (Shmos 25:5).

When Yaakov Avinu, our Patriarch Jacob, left the Holy Land and went down to Egypt to meet Yosef, his long-lost son, he already knew that the day would come that the Jewish Nation would build a Mishkan for G-d and that they’d need shitim wood. And so, despite all the inconvenience of migrating to Egypt with his huge clan of 70 souls, he still remembered to take cedar saplings with him—and once he was settled in Egypt, he planted them and ordered his children to order their own children that when they would ultimately leave Egypt, they were to chop down these trees and take them with them so that they’d have raw materials from which to build the Mishkan.

The Rebbe asks: Why did Yaakov have to bother his sons to bring living cedars saplings from the Holy Land all the way to Egypt? It's a big job! True, they were going to go into the desert where there would be no wood—but all around them were civilized places! They could have easily sent messengers from the desert to buy cedar saplings wherever they grew and bring them back!

It's like the same thing that they did with esrogim that we use on Sukkos. There are no esrogim growing in the desert. And so when G-d commanded the Jewish Nation, "And you shall take for yourselves on the first day, the fruit of the citron tree" (Vayikra 23:40), the Jews sent messengers to Calabria, the traditional esrog region in modern-day Italy, to bring back esrogim.

Now, they could have done the same thing with the cedar saplings. And if so, why did they have to be bothered with dragging trees all the way to Egypt only so that they could be brought back out—especially when Jews are not particularly good shleppers. One Jew will have a backache; another will have rheumatism; and each one will have a pack of pills or vitamins that he takes every day. So it wasn't enough that each one had to carry his suitcases—on top of that, they had to be burdened to drag along heavy wooden beams with which to build the Mishkan?!

But the Rebbe explains, Yaakov Avinu knew that the day would come when the situation in Egypt would get very serious. The Jewish Nation would suffer greatly and they'd turn into a nation of slaves. And on top of that, there'd be the decree that "every boy born is to be thrown into the river"—and they'd start despairing of ever being redeemed. True, they heard many years ago that one day they'd leave Egypt—but in reality, the situation would only be getting worse and worse.

A Jewish boy would ask his father, "You tell me stories that one day we'll leave Egypt—but I'm not sure that this will happen. Maybe someone just invented it so that we'll have something to hope for."

But instead of arguing with his son, the father would go to the forest of trees that their patriarch Yaakov had planted in Egypt, and say to him: "Son, you see these trees? Our grandfather Yaakov was the one who planted them, and for one and only one reason: He knew that the day would come when we would be redeemed from Egypt, and then we'll need wood with which to build a Mishkan for G-d."

Yaakov Avinu wanted something that his descendants would be able to see with their own eyes, to touch with their own hands and to smell with their own noses—something that would physically symbolize to the Jewish Nation that the redemption was something real. And for this consolation, it was worth burdening a couple of Chasidim to drag trees through the desert.

But the trees weren't the only symbol of redemption.

In the Torah portion of Vayechi, we are told that Yaakov Avinu, before his passing, charged his son Yosef to take him out of Egypt and bury him in the Meoras HaMachpelah in the Holy Land, the Cave of the Patriarchs in modern-day Hebron.

Now, Yosef HaTzadik, on the other hand, chose to be buried in Egypt before he died. He summoned his brothers and said to them that when they left Egypt, they should take his casket with them.

Human nature is such that when the subject of burial comes up, people tend to do what their parents did. But here, Yosef did differently—he chose to remain in Egypt and have the Jewish Nation take him out together with them when they would leave Egypt.

The Rebbe says that Yosef did this for the same reason that Yaakov planted cedars in Egypt.

Yosef knew that if he'd request to be buried in the Holy Land and leave the Jewish Nation behind, they'd feel abandoned: Yaakov is no longer with us, and now, Yosef is no longer with us too—we're left alone in exile in Egypt. And so Yosef chose to be buried in Egypt so that the Jewish Nation would know that they were not alone—that their shepherd stayed behind to be together with his flock during the difficult exile.

And this was also a concrete proof that the day would come that they would leave Egypt. Yosef was so confident of the future redemption that he chose to remain in Egypt, instructing the Jewish Nation that when they left, to take him out together with them.

And here we notice an interesting phenomenon. Our ancestors in Egypt weren't satisfied with just one sign that the redemption would happen. It was specifically two separate proofs—both the cedars of Yaakov and the casket of Yosef.

The Torah tells us, "By two witnesses shall a matter stand"—meaning that for something to be certain, one needs two witnesses. One is not enough. And so too is it with signs and symbols—the Torah says that one needs two signs on an animal to know that it is kosher: it must chew its cud and have split hooves. One sign is not enough. Same thing with fish: it must have fins and scales. And we find the same thing with the Mishkan.

One of the miracles of the Mishkan was the Ner Tamid, the eternal flame that never burned out. The Ner Tamid that you see in synagogues is inspired by the Mishkan.

In the Mishkan, you had a menorah with seven branches, one candle on each. Six of the candles would burn all night, every night, and burn out in the morning. But the westernmost candle would miraculously burn around the clock—and this was a proof and "a testimony to all the inhabitants of the world that the Divine Presence dwells among Israel." Meaning, the fact that the westernmost candle never burned out was so that everyone could openly see the Shechinah, the Divine Presence.

And here too, in this case, it wasn't enough that the menorah candle burned miraculously to prove the presence of the Shechinah. Rather, there was another fire too in the Mishkan that also burned miraculously.

This was the fire that was “upon the altar; it shall not be extinguished.”

The altar stood in the courtyard of the Mishkan without any covering overhead, and the eternal flame burned on top of it miraculously, to the point that when they would dismantle the Mishkan for transportation, they would need to cover the flame with a metal dome because otherwise, it would burn up anything it would touch.

Again, we have two “witnesses” that “the Shechinah dwells among Israel.”

We might even add that the custom to light two Shabbos candles on Friday eve also reminds us of the two miracles having to do with fire that occurred in the Mishkan.

And so whatever the future holds for us Jews, whether in the Middle East, in Israel, in the United States or anywhere else in the world, let us remember that the Divine Presence still dwells among the Jewish Nation, among us—that G-d is still with us, and always will be with us.

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