

***Parashah* and Politics: How Torah Changed the World**

Parashat Terumah, Exodus, Chapters 25-27

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

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Art vs. Edifice: The Architecture of Jewish Endurance

Sometimes, a painting depicting destruction can teach us about creation; and an image portraying a people's defeat can actually teach us about this people's endurance.

Let us look at a 19th-century depiction of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the artist David Roberts. As Richard McBee explains in an interesting essay, Roberts was of Scottish origin, and in the 1830s he set out for the Middle East, capitalizing on tremendous British interest in the area and a desire for artistic renderings of it. He painted scenes from the region as he found it, but he also built on the scenery that he saw to portray events from bygone eras, including the exodus from Egypt and the destruction of Jerusalem. His original painting of the latter has been lost, but one early lithograph of it is now owned by the Yeshiva University Museum. It is a remarkable work, though, as McBee notes, Roberts' placement of Titus' troops across the Kidron valley at the moment of the assault is implausible.

I would like to emphasize another aspect of the painting. Roberts had clearly read and studied the layout of the Temple Mount, including the Antonia fortress that was supposed to abut the northern side of the Temple. At the same time, his depiction of the actual Temple is entirely inaccurate. It is very small, but at first glance, it seems pagan in architectural affect—Greek or Roman. And when we enlarge it, we can see that Roberts has given us, as the Temple, the Pantheon of Rome:



Parashah and Politics

Terumah

There could not be two structures more different in intention than the Temple and the Pantheon, and all archeological evidence, we now know today, indicates that they were not alike in design.

Interestingly—as I’ve noted in previous podcasts—when we study other portrayals of the destruction of the Temple we see that this visual analogy was not unique to Roberts. Another painting McBee discusses, an 1867 work by the Italian artist Francesco Hayez, brings us into the Temple complex itself. The focal point of the scene is the Temple courtyard, what Jewish tradition calls the *azarah*. There the sacrificial altar could be found, and Hayez, drawing on Josephus, strikingly depicts the slaughter of the Jewish rebels at the hands of the Romans atop the altar itself:



Hayez here has mistakenly placed steps next to the altar, which were in fact forbidden by the Torah; rather a ramp led up to it. But his greater mistake can be found in the background: again, we see how Hayez has given us a Pantheon-like structure.

Why have the artists made this error? The answer is that they were seeking to illustrate an event: the destruction. The actual layout of the Temple was a subject to which they had not been greatly exposed. They therefore chose a famous ancient sacred building and assumed that it sufficed.

This approach stands in stark contrast to the Jewish relationship with the Temple in the centuries since it last stood. Even more than the destruction itself, Jews sought to remember every aspect of the Temple’s appearance, as well as all the vessels within it and the manifold rules and regulation governing its rites. And it is our *parashah*, above all others, that played the central role in this link of love between a people and its most sacred site. The relationship of the Jewish people with the Temple begins with our reading, in which the commandment to create the Tabernacle is given:

And they shall make for me a sanctuary [*mikdash*], and I shall dwell among them. (Exodus 25:8)



Parashah and Politics

Terumah

The Tabernacle is the central subject of our reading, and it is, essentially, a portable Temple in the desert; or, perhaps it is more accurate to say that the Temple was a permanent Tabernacle. What is being described is the creation of nothing less than a physical home for the presence of God. That is why, as Moses Nahmanides notes, the first object to be described following this commandment is the Ark of the Covenant, which is to bear the tablets of the law within it, and which will serve as the throne of God:

And they shall make an ark of acacia wood, . . . and you shall cover it with pure gold, . . . and you shall place into the ark the tablets of the testimony that I shall give unto you. (Exodus 25:10–16)

Only after this are the other vessels of the Tabernacle—the menorah, the table of shewbread, the altar of incense, and the sacrificial altar—discussed. This throne of God, this ark, containing the words of the Torah, would be placed in the innermost sanctum of the Tabernacle, and ultimately, by Solomon, in the Temple atop Mount Moriah in Jerusalem, signifying that God would dwell there forever. Thus was the obligation of our reading—“and they shall make for me a sanctuary,” a *mikdash*—fulfilled most completely. The other vessels described in our reading, and in those to follow, were arranged in the Temple outside of the *sanctum sanctorum* in the exact pattern as existed in the Tabernacle, as described in our *parashah*.

This Temple was ultimately destroyed, as was the one that came after it. But, in stark contrast to the artists whose works we have seen, the Jews refused to forget, and made sure to remember, all the details of the sanctuary, and of the vessels described in our reading. Many examples of this remembrance exist, but one of the most striking can be found in the story of Judah Leon, a rabbi in the Sephardi community in Amsterdam. Rabbi Leon built a model of Solomon’s Temple and published an accompanying work about it. The model was a sensation; when, during the war between King Charles Stuart and Oliver Cromwell, the king’s wife Henrietta Maria came to Amsterdam to sell her jewels to raise funds, she went to see the model, and befriended this rabbi at a time when no Jews were allowed in England.

As the scholar Al Shane describes, following the restoration of the monarchy decades later, Leon went to England to teach about that Temple. “It would seem,” Shane writes

that Leon was sufficiently encouraged by the interest shown in his models by Queen Henrietta Maria to plan a visit to London after the restoration of the royal family, for the purpose of exhibiting them there.

For this trip, Leon printed an English version of his previously published pamphlet. Shane notes that the booklet was printed with a royal warrant. This, he writes,

is the first recorded use of the royal warrant by a Jew. The use of the royal arms in this manner has always been strictly controlled and certainly required royal permission in Leon’s time. It is unlikely that Leon would have used the royal insignia without permission if he was proposing to present the book bearing it to the king. The probability is that the royal patronage extended to Leon by Queen Henrietta Maria during her stay in Holland included a warrant or permission to use the royal insignia.



Parashah and Politics

Terumah

Moreover, writes Shane:

Leon must be unique in Jewish history, for there cannot have been many rabbis who became famous not so much for their learning as for a traveling exhibition or show, which was widely exhibited for many years and which received Royal Patronage and approval.

Judah Leon is thus a reminder to us how, even after the Temple was destroyed, the Jews continued to fulfill, in a different way, the opening commandment of our *parashah*: “And they shall make for me a sanctuary, and I shall dwell among them.” The Temple was reconstructed in Jewish mind and memory, in text, model, and drawing, and in this way Jerusalem was itself never forgotten.

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Why was the Temple so special to Jews? The answer, of course, begins with the fact that its site was, and is, the dwelling place of the Divine. But the divinely dictated layout of the very vessels whose design is described in our reading was also cherished and remembered, because they were seen as embodiments of Judaism itself, of all that we believe.

Illustrating this point fully is beyond the scope of this presentation; but in order to start to see how this might be so, let us focus on the three vessels that are described as being placed outside the Holy of Holies, separated from the ark by a *parokhet*, an elaborately woven curtain. First there is the table on which sacred bread is placed. Our *parashah* tells us:

And you shall make a table of acacia wood. . . . And you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me always. (Exodus 25:23–30)

Then we have the menorah:

And you shall make a lampstand of pure gold. (Exodus 25:31)

These two objects were placed on opposite ends of the sanctuary. The reading then goes on to describe every other aspect of the Tabernacle, including the site of sacrifice, and then, in next week’s reading, the clothes of the *kohanim*, the men who ministered inside the sanctuary. Then we are informed of another sacred ritual object:

You shall make an altar to burn incense upon; of acacia wood shall you make it. (Exodus 30:1)

On this vessel was offered incense twice daily, a rite forever considered one of the most mystical in the Temple. What does it teach us today? The incense, which rises directly to God, is intended, according to Don Isaac Abarbanel, to represent the human spirit. And once we understand the incense to symbolize the soul, we can perhaps appreciate the blueprint of the Temple’s inner sanctum in all its sublime symbolism.



Parashah and Politics

Terumah



On one side of the room is the menorah, the candelabra, the source of light in the Temple; on the other side is the *shulhan*, the table bearing the shewbread, which was consumed by the *kohanim*, the priests, every Shabbat. And then there is the altar of the incense, placed exactly between them, directly in the center. Moreover, if you look carefully at the layout, you will see that the altar is precisely parallel to the Ark of the Covenant—the ark containing the tablets on the other side of the curtain.

Why is the altar of incense in the center? As many commentators understand it, the menorah represents intellectual pursuits; in the ancient world knowledge was usually divided into seven branches, and this candelabra of seven lamps is thus a representation of enlightenment. The shewbread on the table is Temple food, embodying the physical aspects of life. The altar of incense, symbol of the soul, sits at the center between them. The blueprint of the Temple and Tabernacle thus reminds us that both the physical and the intellectual must be sought; but they must each be mediated, channeled, balanced, and refined by the incense, by the spirit—which is itself sustained by the Torah, in the ark opposite the incense.

The architecture of the Temple represents our faith itself. Judaism has never shut out the world, nor does it reject any true realm of knowledge; but it insists that these never remain separate from the religious realm, that they instead be sanctified by the spirit. These three objects are the three components of the human person: mind and body, both directed and redeemed by the spirit.

With this in mind, we are able to understand how the traditional Jewish response to the destruction of the Temple differs profoundly from that of the world in general, and of Western artists in particular; why for us, the Temple and its layout were never forgotten. Our obligation, as our ancestors saw it, is to ensure that we never, never, confuse our Temple with any other, that we never come close to confusing it with the Pantheon, that we never forget what our magnificent *mikdash* looked like. Of course we mourn the destruction, but part of our remembrance of the event involves a painstaking clinging to the very details of the Temple, keeping it alive in our hearts. We bewail that it is physically gone, but thereby keep it within us until it is physically restored.



Parashah and Politics

Terumah

Thus was the Jewish people preserved. In his book *Conversations with Roger Scruton*, Mark Dooley describes his interviews conducted with the late, great British philosopher. Architecture is a subject Scruton took very seriously, and strikingly, when asked why, he referred to our own *parashah*:

I was quite influenced at a certain stage by the British architect Quinlan Terry, with whom I used to discuss these matters. He is a passionate, evangelical Christian, who takes very seriously the story that, on Mount Sinai, God gave to Moses not just the Ten Commandments and the law, but also the design for a temple—a temple built with columns and architraves. He has the eccentric but interesting view that the classical idiom is of divine inspiration. Whatever you think of that, Quinlan is surely right that the building of a temple is the first step towards undertaking the communal task of settling. It is a consecration of the land, and a bid for a home.

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Indeed: "A consecration of the land, and a bid for home." Architecture defines a people, and the memory of the layout of the Tabernacle and Temple helped sustain a people, preserving its bond to a sacred city, so that today, long after Rome's empire has disappeared, the Jewish people are in Jerusalem still.

Right outside the Israel Museum is a model of Second Temple-era Jerusalem. I always loved the model but did not know its story until I read about it online, and then in a book put out by the Israel Museum. As I've discussed in *Bible and Jerusalem 365*, the model was the brainchild of a man named Hans Kroch, a Jewish developer who lived in Germany during the war. Kroch's wife was murdered by the Nazis, but he and his children managed to escape. Then, in 1948, loss followed loss: his son, defending Nitzanim in the Negev, died in Israel's War of Independence. Kroch wanted to honor his son's memory, so he approached the archaeologist Michael Avi-Yonah and suggested that, because the Old City had been lost and Jews could not visit the most sacred parts of Jerusalem, perhaps he could remind the Jewish people, in memory of his son's sacrifice, of the glory of Jerusalem that once was.

Kroch had lost his son. And the Jewish people had lost the Old City. He wished to respond to both losses by giving a model of the *mikdash*, and Jerusalem, to his people. Consider it: a father loses his son in the birth of the Jewish state; and yet rather than reject Jewish history, he seeks to sustain it, remember it, cherish it. How can we do otherwise? How can we not create a model of the *mikdash*, not only outside a museum, but also within ourselves?

Our reading is not a series of technicalities, but the symbol of Judaism itself; it embodies an architecture of the spirit of our faith, one we have built in every generation in our hearts, until we will see it in Jerusalem once again.



Additional Resources

Richard McBee on Memorializing the Destruction of Jerusalem, “Mourning, Memory & Art,” August 8, 2011.
[Click here to read.](#)

A History of the Israel Museum’s Model of Jerusalem, “The Model of Jerusalem in the Second Temple Period,”
The Israel Museum. [Click here to read.](#)

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May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.

