

Customs and Laws from the Parsha: Terumah

A version of this article first appeared in Daf HaShavuah published by the Rabbinical Council of the United Synagogue.

Build for me a Sanctuary, and I will dwell amongst them. (Exodus 25:8)

The Torah gives us the instructions for building the mishkan – the portable sanctuary or Temple used before the building of the Temple in Jerusalem by king Solomon. While it would seem that there is little relevance to these verses today, the Zohar notes that the commandment to build synagogues wherever there is a Jewish community is also included in this verse (Zohar 3:126a). The Talmud relates that since we no longer have the Temple in Jerusalem, our synagogues and study halls are like a *mikdash me'at* – a miniature sanctuary (Megillah 29a).

For this reason, many of the characteristics of our synagogues reflect the physical characteristics of the Temple. The Ark which holds our Torah scrolls hidden by a curtain is like the Holy of Holies in the Temple which was concealed with a curtain (Exodus 26:33). The bimah (raised platform where the Torah is read) mirrors the sacrificial altar.

Based on a verse in Daniel the synagogue should have windows which face Jerusalem (Daniel 6:11). The Shulchan Aruch adds that ideally, there should be at least twelve windows (Code of Jewish Law 90:4). The first century sage and kabbalist Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai explains that since the earthly Temple mirrors the heavenly Temple which contained twelve windows, so too our synagogues must have at least twelve windows (Zohar Pikudei 251:1). Some synagogues adopt the custom of decorating them with symbols from the twelve tribes.

The Ner Tamid (everlasting light) is associated with the menorah (seven branched candelabra) which was lit in the Temple each day (Exodus 27:20). It is also connected with the incense altar which burned continuously in front of the ark (Exodus 30:7-8).

In particular, the Ner Tamid has become a symbol of God's eternal and imminent Presence in our communities and in our lives. Even though we have lost our Temple in Jerusalem, we try to retain as many of its features as possible. In this way we can continue to bring light into our lives and strengthen our connection with God.

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