

Terumah: Abraham's tree

King Solomon uses the analogy of a bride and groom, to describe the relationship between the Jewish people and God respectively, in his epic poem Shir HaShirim, Song of Songs. The story of the Exodus can be viewed with the same analogy.

In exile, the Jewish people had no real connection to God. In fact, in the beginning when the Israelites were suffering from the harsh decrees of the wicked Pharaoh, the Torah does not say that the Israelites pleaded to God, but that they merely cried out (Exodus 2:23). Furthermore, the purpose of the plagues was not only to break the exile, but to make God known to Pharaoh, the Egyptians, and the fledgling Israelite nation. Subsequently, the Jewish people are redeemed and brought to the foot of Mount Sinai.

To continue King Solomon's analogy, this is akin to two individuals who as yet have no connection with one another but start to become acquainted. As the couple's relationship builds it reaches a point where a proposal is made. Similarly, God proposes an everlasting covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai.

The next stage is that the couple must set up home together. This is represented by the primary command given in this week's portion. The Tabernacle is the portable sanctuary which the Jewish people will take with them on their journey through the desert on their way the Land of Israel (Exodus 25:8).

One of the details of the Tabernacle was that there was a middle bar inside the planks of the walls which extended from end to end (Exodus 26:28). The Aramaic translation attributed to Yonatan ben Uzziel notes that this middle bar was made from the wood of a tree planted by Abraham in Beersheva (see Genesis 21:33).

The Gemara cites two opinions that this tree was either from an orchard that bore the fruits which Abraham served to his guests or that it formed the inn where the guests stayed (Sotah 10a). Either way, it represented Abraham's trait of *gemilut chasadim* – acts of loving-kindness towards others.

The Mishnah states that the world stands on three things; Torah, *avodah* (the service of God) and *gemilut chasadim* (Pirkei Avot, Ethics of Our Fathers 1:2). The house which brought God and the Jewish people together contained Torah with the Ark of the Covenant and it contained the service of God through the offerings brought. Yet it was the wood from Abraham's tree, representing acts of kindness towards others that held the entire structure together.

Similarly, a Jewish family home must be based on the principles of Jewish law and customs (*Torah*). Secondly it must be a place where husband-wife and parent-child relationships are built and nurtured (*avodah*). But thirdly, it must be a place which reaches out to others in order to bolster the wider community (*gemilut chasadim*). With these three pillars, we help to weave the fabric for better families and in turn a better society for all.

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