

## In Awe – Behar-Bechukotai

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את שבתתי תשמרו ומקדשי תיראו אני ה' (ויקרא כו, ב)

We always begin our Beit HaMikdash baking workshops with a short video clip containing a 3-D simulation of the Mishkan, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Beit HaMikdash, to put everyone in the mood. The Beit HaMikdash was designed to inspire awe, the sheer size of the buildings, the opulence, the attention to the tiniest detail, the demeanor with which Am Yisrael entered and served in the Beit HaMikdash, etc.

The Rambam lists מוֹרָא מְקַדָּשׁ as one of the מִצְוֹת עֲשֵׂה דְאוֹרְיָתָא and in שו"ת מוֹרָא מְקַדָּשׁ goes into great detail regarding the rules of entering and performing Avodah in the Beit HaMikdash. The clearly delineated areas where men and women were allowed to go, those who were טָמֵא, how to enter, from which direction, how to leave, to not enter יִנְיָן, with your hair overly long, with unsuitable clothing, etc. etc. The punishments for contravening these laws of decorum are very severe, some warrant כָּרַת, some שְׁמִימִים, etc.

The Sefer HaChinuch (רנד, [פרנקפורט]) says the purpose of this mitzva is—

לירוא מן המקדש: כלומר שנגעמידהו בנפשותינו מקום הפחד והיראה, כדי שיתרבו לבבינו בבואנו שם להתפלל או להקריב קרבנות, שנאמר "ומקדשי תיראו".

The Beit HaMikdash should fill our spirit with fear and awe in order that our hearts will be softened when we come there to pray or sacrifice korbanot. The Chinuch then goes on to repeat the laws stated by the Rambam.

The Gemara (יבמות ו, ע"ב) clarifies לא ממקדש אֵתָה מְתִירָא אֵלָא מִמִּי שְׁהִזְהִיר עַל הַמְּקַדָּשׁ, the fear and awe are not for the Mikdash "building", but for He Who warned us to fear the Mikdash, i.e. HKB"H. We have to constantly remember *why* we are in the Beit HaMikdash. It is not to chas vechalila serve and bow down to the structures, but to HKB"H Himself.

There is a lot to talk about regarding this mitzva, for example the lively debate over whether one is permitted to go up to Har HaBayit today or not. In this shiur, however, I would like to explore a different aspect altogether, one much closer to home.

A few psukim later, as part of the curses in Bechukotai, the Torah says וְנִתַּתִּי אֶת עֲרִיכְם חֲרָבָה וְהִשְׁמֹתִי אֶת מְקַדְשֵׁיכֶם וְלֹא אֶרִים בְּרִים נִחְחֶכֶם (ויקרא כו, לא). The Sifra on this passuk says לְרַבּוֹת בְּתִי כְּנִסְיוֹת וּבְתִי מְדַרְשׁוֹת (לא).

Now that we do not (yet) have the Beit Mikdash, the laws of fear and awe for the Beit HaMikdash apply *equally* to בְּתֵי כְּנִסְיֹת וּבְתֵי מִדְרָשׁוֹת, our shuls and batei midrash. It is actually a machloket rishonim whether the mitzva of מוֹרָא הַמְּקַדָּשׁ regarding a shul is דְּאִוְרִיתָא or דְּרַבְּנָן. Most poskim say that the severe prohibitions (such as demolishing a shul), are דְּאִוְרִיתָא, but the "lighter" prohibitions (such as talking in shul), are דְּרַבְּנָן (that does not mean we are permitted to contravene them in any way).

I grew up in Johannesburg, South Africa in a suburb called Yeoville. My family attended the Yeoville shul (Synagogue), which followed the style and tradition of most orthodox shuls in the Diaspora. It was an impressive building with lavish (by then aging) wood furnishings, an impressive בְּיָמָה, an equally impressive אֶרֶץ קֹדֶשׁ, flanked on one side by the Rabbi's seat and on the other by the president and vice president's seats, facing the community. The latter wore ceremonious top hats in shul and the Rabbi was robed in a black gown, with a special Rabbi's hat, as were the Chazan and the Shamash, each with their own style hats (I ended up later marrying the Shamash's granddaughter).

My young childhood memories of Yeoville shul were those of awe. Everything was larger than life, decorum was sacred – chas vechalila a child should make a "peep" in shul. I would like to think that nobody ever spoke there, not even the adults. That is how I remember it as a young child (although in reality there must have been a few "yappers" – there are in every shul, but they were definitely the exception).

If Yeoville shul was impressive, then עַל אַחַת כְּמָה וְכְמָה was the Wolmarans Street shul, the seat of the Chief Rabbi of South Africa (at the time Rabbi Casper zt"l). A *spectacular* shul, at least three times the size of Yeoville shul with incrementally more ornate furnishings and fittings. Besides being the shul of the Chief Rabbi, it was also home to many famous chazanim and the best shul choir in the country, then conducted by Oshy Tugendhaft (who later became the chief chazan). I had the privilege to lein there a few times when I was a teenager and the awe of the place was tangible.

The problem with Yeoville shul was that they did not encourage the youth to participate in the shul service in any way, not in the davening, the leining, the aliyot, etc. The only task any youngster (under the age of 18) was allowed to perform was to sing אֲנָעִים זְמִירוֹת.

As a result, when I passed the age of bar mitzvah and became an avid leiner, my family decided to move to the Bnei Akiva shul, 1.5km down the road. The Bnei Akiva shul occupied the top floor of the Johannesburg Bet Din building, it was a small, respectable shul, the Rabbi (Kurtstag) was the Av Bet Din, but it had little of the pomp and ceremony of the Yeoville shul. It was a much more laid-back, informal shul. The youth were encouraged to actively participate in the services and the leining and I soon became one of the main leiners and ba'alei

tefilla there. Despite the greater inclusion and active participation, something inside me still missed the "pomp" and especially the chazanut of Yeoville shul (I remain a fan of chazanut to this day). It always irked me when a ba'al tefilla got up and did not daven with the correct nusach and nigun.

Then at age twenty-one I made aliyah and in Israel discovered that the shuls were even *more* informal than the Bnei Akiva shul of my youth. With the exception of a small number of shuls around the country, like Heichal Shlomo and the Yeshurun shul in Yerushalayim, most of the shuls in Israel are *very* informal.

I cannot speak for other countries in the Diaspora, but I imagine that many others who made aliyah to Israel had a similarly hard time acclimatizing to the informality of the shuls here in Israel.

In truth, there is an inherent dilemma here. On the one hand, many of the decorum-rich, pomp & ceremony shuls in the Diaspora, including the Yeoville and Wolmarans shul in Johannesburg – no longer exist. Their communities advanced in age and passed away and because they did not invest in their youth, there was nobody to continue from where they left off. The buildings that once housed these shuls are no longer shuls - they were sold for other purposes. They are but a memory.

On the other hand, the vibrant, thriving shuls, both in the Diaspora and in Israel, are informal, laid-back shuls with almost *zero awe*. When people attend these shuls, it is more like a community center than a shul. It is a gathering of community members who use the opportunity to socialize and catch up on the goings on in the community. Much of this socializing and catching up, is often done in shul, often during the davening.

The question is one of balance. How do you balance a vibrant community life with the awe required in a shul?

In the Diaspora, I believe they found a workable formula by having a weekly "kiddush" on Shabat after Musaf in the adjoining hall. This gave everyone an opportunity to socialize and maintain community ties and also maintain the sanctity of the shul and the decorum.

Here in Israel, though, weekly "kiddushes" are not the norm. Kiddushes are reserved usually for special occasions only, which means that the shul doubles as a shul and a community center – at the same time, during tefilot.

Until Corona a few years ago, I was part and parcel of this community dynamic. When COVID hit us and we were all suddenly "banished" from our shuls because of health considerations, it got me to thinking. I consider myself a Mikdash "activist", someone who is highly involved in practically working to

rebuild the Beit HaMikdash. I was trying to figure out why HKB"H had prevented us from gathering in our shuls. It seemed as if HKB"H "didn't want us there", He was communicating something to us and I tried to understand what He was trying to tell us.

This is not chas vechalila a criticism on anyone else - except myself. I did a lot of personal introspection and came to the conclusion that I was living a glaring paradox. On the one hand I was investing much of my time and energy to rebuilding the 3<sup>rd</sup> Beit HaMikdash, but meanwhile my behavior in the Mikdash that we *already have*, our מְקֹדֵשׁ מְעֻט, the shul – was incongruent. I was treating the shul like a community center and not a Mikdash.

Since then, קִבְּלֹתִי עַל עֲצָמִי that I was going to start treating the shul like a Beit Mikdash mamash. Entering it in awe, reciting מָה טוֹבוֹ as I walked to my seat, like the Kohanim did in the Mikdash עָקַב בְּצַד גּוֹדֵל, not running about or slouchingly, but respectfully and purposely. I resolved that I was going to reduce my שִׁיחַת הַלֵּין in shul down to a bare minimum. That I was not going to gaze at the clock after the tefilla began, until I had finished putting away my tefillin and tallit at the end. That I was going to arrive at shul 20 minutes before Shacharit and 10 minutes before Mincha to say korbanot properly. That I was going to use my time in shul to talk *only to HKB"H* and to nobody else. (If I would have owned a smartphone, which I don't [I don't like them], I would have resolved to leave it at home when I went to shul – but since I don't own one, that was irrelevant).

The transformation for me was remarkable. My experience in shul suddenly assumed that of actually being in the Beit HaMikdash mamash. However, it had one downside. The people around me could not understand why I suddenly stopped talking to them, as I had done before. Some of them were very offended by it. I noticed this and purposely approached them (outside shul) to explain that it had nothing to do with them in any way and that I was not being a snob. I am מְקַפֵּיד to respond to and smile at anyone who greets me in shul, but when it digresses into שִׁיחַת הַלֵּין, I respectfully ask them to step outside a minute to discuss it further. If I see there is no way to get out of communicating with them in shul without offending them, I will respond to prevent offending them and causing machloket.

There is no question that a vibrant, lively shul that has less awe is preferable to a decorum-strict shul that minimizes community interaction and involvement. Silent shuls without the sounds of children and *life* become extinct. They simply do not survive. This is the מְצִיאוֹת.

My neshama yearns for the beautiful chazanut and nigunim and awe that I experienced as a child in Yeoville shul, but the מְצִיאוֹת is that Yeoville shul disappeared because it could not find the correct balance between awe and life.

There is such a balance. The Beit HaMikdash is such a balance. When we are inside the Beit HaMikdash, we have to be constantly conscious that we are standing on holy ground and לִפְנֵי מִי אָנֹכִי עוֹמְדִים. The awesome structural design of the Beit Hamikdash definitely contributes to that, but we have to be careful that we serve – not the building – but He Who resides there. If you have a magnificent structure, but zero understanding before Whom you are standing, יִצְאָ שְׁכָרוֹ בְּהִפְסְדוֹ, you are defeating the purpose.

A shul that cherishes life will work hard to balance "community" with "G-d". To allocate space and time to both. To clearly delineate boundaries between them and not blur the boundaries. Such a מְקַדְשׁ מְעַט is our *greatest* saving grace and claim to HKB"H. Only when we can show HKB"H that we respect our מְקַדְשׁ מְעַט, can we rightfully ask him to restore the מְקַדְשׁ mamash.

The balance emanates from love, love for HKB"H, love for our fellow Jew, love for our children in shul. When we operate according to that mindset, we have a healthy dynamic that builds such a balance. When we alienate *any* of the above by improper behavior, by inappropriate remarks, by improper glances, etc. we are destroying that dynamic. When we can cultivate a reality of דָּן לְכַף זְכוּת and סָבַר פְּנִים יְפוֹת in our shuls, both in our relationship with HKB"H and with those together with us in shul, we will be on the right path.

According to the Gemara (יבמות סב, ע"ב), 24,000 of R' Akiva's students died מִפְּנֵי שֶׁלֹא נִהְגּוּ כְבוֹד זֶה לְזֶה. Accord to one opinion, R' Akiva's students looked at what happened with the first Beit Mikdash, that it was destroyed because of הַקְנָאָה וְהַתְאַוָּה וְהַכְבוֹד (which are the inner essence of שְׂפִיכוּת וְזָרָה וְדָמִים, עֲרִיוֹת וְעִבּוּדָה זָרָה). They said to themselves כְבוֹד is a *bad* thing, so they eliminated it, they gave no כְבוֹד to each other *at all*. This deteriorated into not even acknowledging each other and ultimately disrespecting one another. כְבוֹד in excess is a negative thing, but you need to give you fellow Jew a *minimum* of כְבוֹד otherwise society breaks down into חֲנָם.

Parshat Behar-Bechukotai is all about balance. Balancing your hishtadlut with Emunah (working six years and resting on Shmita). Balancing blessings with curses.

What is the source of balance?

אֶת שַׁבָּתִי תִשְׁמְרוּ וּמְקַדְשִׁי תִירָאוּ, Shabbat precedes awe of the Mikdash because Shabbat is the fulcrum point that provides balance. We do hishtadlut by working six days, but we must observe Shabbat to reacquire balance. Shabbat blesses the upcoming week, it gives it a "battery recharge" until the next Shabbat, like the Lechem HaPanim are switched every Shabbat on the Shulchan, to recharge the blessing for the upcoming week.

The Gemara says that the miracle of the Lechem HaPanim was סילוקו (חגיגה כו, ע"ב), that the state of the Lechem HaPanim at the end of the week, when it was removed was the same as when it was first placed on the Shulchan the previous week (fresh as if it had just come out of the oven). The lesson this teaches us is that our week should end the way it begins. If the week begins with the blessing of Shabbat, it should end in the same way. The Bracha of Shabbat permeates the entire week and gives it balance.

This is the lesson of the proximity between the parsha of the Lechem HaPanim in Emor to the parsha of Shmita in Behar, to our passuk above at the end of Behar and to the parsha with the blessings and curses. It is all about balance – balancing awe and love.

Shabbat Shalom

Eliezer Meir Saidel

Machon Lechem Hapanim

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