

A-355

"The House that Solomon Built"

An Ancient Commentary on the Modern Synagogue

Just how important is the Synagogue in Jewish life?

This ~~is a question that~~ agitated some of the best minds of the Talmudic sages some two millennia ago when they debated the relative worths of Synagogue and School. It was a source for deep thought and contemplation by medieval thinkers who were comparing the merits of ^{prayer in the} Synagogues ^{and} ~~these are~~ the other mitzvot. ~~And~~ ^{It} is a significant and crucial question in our own day, when the Synagogue has become ~~the~~ focal point of the entire Jewish community and its single most important institution. ^u Just how important should the synagogue be in Jewish life?

On the one hand, it is clear that the Bet ha-Kneset, the Synagogue, is preeminently a place of holiness, or Kedushah. Thus our Talmud tells us ~~and these words ought to be considered carefully by all those who are contemplating moving to some new suburb -- that it is forbidden to live in a city in which there is no Synagogue (Sanhedrin 17).~~ The Talmud of Jerusalem taught that he who ^sprayed in a Bet ha-Kneset, ~~it~~ is considered as if he had personally ^{made} ~~offered~~ an offering in the Temple of old. And our Talmud, again, tells us that Rabbi Joshua, the son of Levi, told his children always to be ^{service} ~~careful~~ and rise early to attend the Synagogue ^{merit} ~~so that they lived~~ long ^{the} ~~lives~~ (Berakhot 18).

So that you cannot gainsay the value of the Synagogue. It is ^{the} a place where the Jew pours out his heart before G-d. It is a place where there occurs the dialogue between G-d and His children. It is the place where the noise of the marketplace and the clamor of the world are silent before the awe of the Almighty.

Yet, on the other hand, just saying that a Synagogue is important is not telling the whole story. We must qualify, explain, and analyze.

"The House that Solomon Built"
An Ancient Commentary on the Modern Synagogue

Let us then turn to our Haftorah, from the ^{First} Second Book of Kings, which tells us about the Holy Temple, the Bet ha-Mikdash, the House that Solomon built -- the precursor of the modern Synagogue. ^{would seem} ~~It was seen from~~ The two concluding verses, (11-13) containing G-d's promise and challenge to Solomon ^{and} Israel upon the completion of the building of the House, ^{too} ~~that~~ ^{here} Contemporary Jews are offered some extremely pertinent advice that they ought to take to heart. In an indirect hint, by means of a peculiar sentence structure, the Bible offers an ancient commentary on the modern Synagogue.

"And the word of the Lord came to Solomon, saying: 'As for this house which thou art building -- ha-bayit ha-zeh asher atah boneh -- if thou wilt walk in My statutes, and execute My laws, and observe all My commandments to walk in them; then will I establish My word with thee, which I spoke unto David thy father; in that I will dwell therein among the children of Israel, and will not forsake My people in Israel.' "

What have we here? G-d's charge to Solomon begins by introducing the topic: ha-bayit ha-zeh asher atah boneh -- "as for this house which thou art building." One would expect that after this introduction of the subject of his statement, G-d would proceed with instructions concerning this House or Temple. One expects to hear such words as "keep this House intact; revere it; treat it with respect; bring sacrifices or pray therein." Instead, the bulk of the statement that follows this introduction speaks of everything but the House or Bet ha-Mikdash. It speaks, ^{rather} ~~instead~~, of the general observance of all mitzvot, and ~~the following obedience to~~ of G-d's will on general principles. How does the second half follow from the first?

And the answer is that this is precisely what G-d wanted to tell Solomon upon this ~~auspicious~~ occasion of the dedication of the new House of G-d. He told him, "Solomon, a Synagogue or a Temple is not an end in itself. This House which you are

"The House that Solomon Built"
An Ancient Commentary on the Modern Synagogue

building -- is not for the sake of the ^{itself} house. A Synagogue or a Temple must be, rather, a sacred means to serve the ends of Jewish living ^{all it} in the fullness thereof. The main function and importance of the Synagogue is to remind all Jews to live Jewish lives at home and in business, at work and at play. A synagogue thus must serve a basically educational function: to inspire ~~the~~ ^{obedience} following of G-d's will, shemirat ha-mitzvot, even outside of the sacred precincts of the Temple itself. And even as an educational institution, the Synagogue is different from the school. A school is an education for Jewish living; a Synagogue is an education in Jewish living. A school tells you how to observe the law of G-d. A Synagogue urges you to follow the word of the Lord.

A Synagogue tells us that there is more to Jewish life than a Synagogue alone. A Synagogue reminds us that G-d is everywhere, not confined to one building. For a synagogue is ^{His} A House, not His prison. And the object of the Synagogue, is not that we go through the prayer book, but that the prayer book go through us.

A Synagogue should remind us of the famous Hassidic story of the renowned rabbi of Ropshitz, of whom it is told that when he was a very young lad, a man came to him and said, "Naftali, I will give you a coin if you will tell me where G-d is." At which the ^{boy} ~~young lad~~ answered, "And I will give you two coins if you tell me where He is not."

This whole question of the importance and the function of a Synagogue is far more than merely theoretical. It is profoundly practical. Let me give you an example.

Very often people approach an Orthodox ^{Sew} ~~rabbi~~ ^{or} ~~and Orthodox laymen~~, and ask a questions that ^{is} ~~are~~ of immediate consequence to them. ~~"Rabbi,"~~ ^{Why} can't I ride

"The House that Solomon Built"
An Ancient Commentary on the Modern Synagogue

to services on the Sabbath?" This is a question which, painful though it is, must be treated in all earnestness and seriousness. There is even an apparent logic to the question. The Synagogue is a place where^{ne} I draw religious warmth. It is a place^{to which} I come ^{in order} to be charged with the electricity of faith as from a storage battery of the spirit. So what if I ^{commit} violate a minor infraction of the Sabbath code in order to derive the greater spiritual benefit of the Synagogue?

^{But this} And yet the question is based upon the profound fallacy, the deep misunderstanding of the function of the Synagogue. If ha-bayit ha-zeh asher atah boneh, the House that we build, the Synagogue that we construct, is an end in itself, if this is the goal of Jewish life, then indeed the question is a right one. Then, we ought to permit riding to the Synagogue on the Sabbath. But, if as we have tried to point out, and as the Bible hints at in its particular phrasing of the Lord's words to Solomon, the Synagogue is not an end in itself, that it is, rather, that which ^{serves} comes to remind and inspire the Jew to live a full Jewish life in all its phases; then the question is meaningless and purposeless. For indeed one of the very functions of a Synagogue is to teach us to observe the Sabbath. One of the very purposes of the House of G-d is to tell us that we may not ride and thereby violate the will of G-d. If, in the process of coming to the Synagogue, we disobey the Torah, then we as much as say that we are coming to the Synagogue knowing beforehand that we shall not accept its message. We vitiate and invalidate that synagogal message before we even ^{arrive} get there.

It is in this connection that Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch once interpreted a biblical verse in an almost prophetic manner. The Torah tells us: Et Shabtotai tishmoru v'et mikdashai tira'u, Ani ha-Shem -- "My Sabbath shall ye observe and My sanctuaries shall ye revere, for I am the Lord." What is the relation between the Sabbath and the Sanctuaries? ^{He} And the answer is: The Torah means to tell us

"The House that Solomon Built"
An Ancient Commentary on the Modern Synagogue

that important as is the reverence for the Sanctuary, central as is the Temple and Synagogue in Jewish life, it must never be at the expense of the Sabbath. If, in the course of revering the sanctuary, you wish to desecrate the Sabbath -- that is absolutely forbidden! For "I am the Lord" -- the same G-d who has commanded you to revere and worship in the Sanctuary, has ~~first~~ commanded you to give priority to the observance of the Sabbath! Ha-bayit ha-zeh asher atah boneh -- the House of G-d, the synagogue, is but an end to remind us of the second half of the verse, bidding us to observe all the commandments of the Lord.

Is not this concept of the synagogue and its place in Jewish life a principle which serves as a dividing line between traditional, Orthodox Jews and those who have abandoned Traditional Judaism?

The modern "dissenters," as ^{Herman} Wouk has called them, in concentrating upon the synagogue, have abandoned the rest of Jewish life. Whereas, the synagogue should be a place to reinforce Jewish living, with them it has replaced Jewish life. What all of us must understand is this: When you look for G-d only in the Temple, you will not find Him even in the Temple.

The synagogue is the heir of the Temple of old. And ha-bayit ha-zeh asher atah boneh, the Temple or Synagogue must be the center of Jewish life, not the totality of Jewish experience. For if the Synagogue is conceived of as the sum ~~totality~~ of Jewish experience, then it is the object of outside influences, the passive recipient of all that is dominant in the world about. Then all that is cheap and ephemeral in our lives is brought in to defile and corrupt the sanctuary. Hence, you will notice the departures and the changes from sacred tradition in the non-Orthodox Temples.

But if the Synagogue is recognized as a holy center, which emanates blessing and radiates Kedushah outward, into our homes and daily lives, then though our

"The House that Solomon Built"
An Ancient Commentary on the Modern Synagogue

own personal behavior may be inadequate, though we may realize that in our daily conduct we do not observe as much as we should, still -- because we have kept our Synagogue pure and our Sanctuary undefiled -- that House of G-d can properly fulfill its historic, transcendent function by influencing ^{our} ~~my~~ ^{life} and changing ~~us~~ ^{me} for the better some time in the future.

At the end of the Amidah prayer, the most important of all our prayers, (~~which is the characteristic activity of the synagogue~~), we recite a short, beautiful, well known passage that summarizes what we have been trying to say. Yehi ratzon mi'le'fanekha, May it be Thy will O Lord our G-d and G-d of our fathers; she'yibaneh Bet ha-Mikdash bi'meherah vi'yamenu, that the Temple be rebuilt speedily in our days; ve'ten chelkenu be'toraktekha, and grant us a portion in Thy Torah; ve'sham naavadkha be'yirah, Ki'yemei olam u'khe'shanim kadmoniyot, and there shall we worship Thee in reverence as in the days of old and years gone by.

Is this not, too, a queer construction? We begin by asking for the rebuilding of a Temple, announcing that we will then "there" serve G-d in reverence -- but ~~in~~ between these two phrases, we introduce another, seemingly extraneous passage: "Grant us a portion in Thy Torah." Logically, the idea of binyan Bet ha-Mikdash, the rebuilding of the Temple, should be immediately followed by ve'sham naavadkha be'yirah -- that "there" we will worship G-d in reverence.

What the author of this beautiful prayer meant is clear enough. He meant to tell us that if not for ve-ten chelkenu be'toratekha, if not for our portion in G-d's Torah and our observance of His will in all ^{aspects} ~~phases~~ of life, then binyan Bet ha-Mikdash is merely another manifestation of the "edifice complex," just another ^{example} ~~aspect~~ of the modern obsession and craze for building for the sake of building, and not the kind of holy place of which we will be able to say

"The House that Solomon Built"
An Ancient Commentary on the Modern Synagogue

ve'sham naavadkha be'yirah, that "there," in that place, we shall worship G-d in awe and reverence. Only if the Bet ha-Mikdash -- the ~~T~~emple and the ~~S~~ynagogue -- serve the function of reminding us of all of Torah, can we hope to use that House of G-d in the way intended by G-d: for reverent service.

We who are loyal to the word of G-d, who bear the full and unimpaired tradition of Israel, must teach that principle to our fellow Jews and to all of Israel. We must remind them that the Synagogue is the Jewish center, not the totality of Judaism. For this indeed was the word of the Lord to Solomon in ages gone by. Ha-bayit ha-zeh asher atah boneh -- this house that you are building must remind you to observe My commandments and do My laws so that "I will dwell therein among the children of Israel, and will not forsake My people in Israel."

May it be the will of G-d that we, in our House of G-d, learn to do the will of the Lord in our own homes and in our own lives, so that the G-d of our fathers will dwell within this ~~H~~ouse and never forsake our people. Amen.