

The Walls Made of Foolish Cedar

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Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

Parshat Terumah

This section of the Torah (Exodus 25:1-27:19) tells us of the construction of the Tabernacle, the portable Sanctuary which we carried with us during our forty years' wandering in the wilderness. The walls and fixtures of the Tabernacle were made of wood cut from cedar trees¹ (the text is more often translated as "acacia," but Rebbe Menahem Mendel Schneerson of Lubavitch, in his *Likkutei Sichot*, chooses to identify the wood as cedar),² and this fact itself teaches us at least two valuable lessons.

The cedar is called in Hebrew *shittah* (שִׁטָּה),³ a word derived from the same linguistic root as (or, at least, similar enough in sound and spelling that it reminds us of) the word *sh'tut* (שִׁטוּת), meaning *foolishness*. Two questions. Why are the cedars called foolish? Why are the walls and fixtures of the Tabernacle built of foolish things?

The cedar tree stands tall and proud; it is the stateliest of trees. The cedar, by its stance, proclaims its nobility. But what does the cedar have of which it can be proud? It is a tree, growing as G*d has directed. It does not (so far as we can tell) compose poetry nor write beautiful music nor create art nor philosophize nor study nor learn. How foolish of the cedar to be so proud!

How often do we succumb to pride. We are proud of our accomplishments. We are proud of our art, our music, our literature, our learning, even our spirituality. We even take pride in our humility! But we have no more reason to be proud than does the cedar. Our pride is as foolish as that of the cedar.

It was an academy conducted by a great spiritual master, and the students were known for their great humility. In order to attain such humility, it was the custom at the academy for the students to sit each morning for half an hour, rocking back and forth and chanting the mantra, "I am nothing; I am nothing."

¹ Exodus 25:5 and throughout the Parshah.

² The Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 28a) identifies this tree as a member of the cedar family. The Septuagint translates as "decay-proof wood."

³ The plural (as we find it in this verse) is שִׁטִּים.

One morning, a new student arrived at the academy. Upon entering the study hall, he found hundreds of students chanting, "I am nothing."

He checked the sign outside the door to make sure he was in the right place and then decided he might as well go in and join them. He found an empty seat, sat down, and began rocking back and forth, chanting, "I am nothing, I am nothing."

The student seated next to him turned and said to him, "The nerve of you! I was here an entire year before I was nothing!"

How foolish is pride!

But. . . .

The walls and fixtures of the Tabernacle were built, at G*d's direction, of cedar, of foolish-wood. Even foolishness, even the foolishness of pride, can play its role in the construction of the Sanctuary. And our foolishness, too, has its uses.

Perhaps the greatest foolishness is to act without thinking. Yet there are times when it is beneficial to act first and think later. At Sinai, the Torah tells us that we affirmed (Exodus 19:8), **All that the Eternal has spoken we will [first] do and [only then] hear.**

In the mid-1930s, my father, anticipating the Nazis' overrunning of Hungary, borrowed some money from his brother to buy a ticket out. The travel agent, counting the money that my father offered, booked him to Caracas, Venezuela. My father bought the ticket and then went to the library to consult a World Atlas and find out where Venezuela was. And he learned to speak Spanish only after his arrival in Caracas. Because he "foolishly" acted first and considered later, his life was saved.

The cedar is called the foolish tree, and its stance cautions us against the foolishness of pride. But the wood of the cedar is used to construct the walls and fixtures of the Tabernacle, and this reminds us of the (sometime) value of even the greatest foolishness.

To the avoidance and to the embrace of our foolishness (and to an understanding of when each is appropriate) may we speedily be led.

Shabbat Shalom.