

Two and a Half Cubits

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Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

Parshat Terumah

In this week's Torah reading, we find a detailed discussion of the construction of the Tabernacle, the Sanctuary which we carried with us during our forty years' wandering through the wilderness. We are told to take gold and silver and other material articles and construct a Sanctuary for G*d. And the text then tells us explicitly (Exodus 25:8), **Let them build Me a Sanctuary and I shall dwell within it.**

What's wrong with this picture? G*d will reside within the Sanctuary constructed from these material substances? But G*d cannot be limited by physical place. Nevertheless, G*d promises to live within the Sanctuary that is built in this material world, a Sanctuary in a particular place and with certain prescribed dimensions.

There is, of course, the Kabbalistic interpretation – **Let them become Sanctuaries for Me, for I dwell within them** – but we shall, with G*d's help, discuss that in detail another time. For now, let us look at the plain-text meaning.

Not only the Temple, when it was built in Jerusalem, but even the portable Tabernacle, which we carried with us throughout our wanderings in the wilderness. Each was intended as a dwelling place for G*d, even though G*d cannot be confined to any single location, as the Prophet (Jeremiah 23:24) tells us, **I fill the heavens and the earth.** Why, then, did G*d command that a specific place be established for the Divine Presence to dwell?

It is not for G*d's sake that we are commanded to construct a Sanctuary; G*d can be worshipped anywhere. As G*d tells us in the Torah portion which we read two weeks ago (Exodus 20:21), **In every place where I enable My Name to be mentioned, I shall be with thee and I shall bless thee.** So why the Sanctuary?

It is absolutely true that G*d does not need a special place. Further, G*d has no need of our sacrifices. In fact, the sacrifices we offered in the Tabernacle and in the Temple did/do nothing for G*d. But they do a great deal for us, for we learn through our sacrifices – and today we bring sacrifices of our material possessions rather than the

dead chickens and cows which our ancestors brought – that we have a responsibility to act as good stewards rather than merely exploitive owners of the items in our possession. G*d does not need our worship, but we need to worship G*d, to acknowledge that there is Someone greater than we, and our worship becomes more concentrated when we have a particular place upon which we can focus it. G*d, realizing that having a “holy place” would greatly enhance our worship and our ability to relate to G*d, graciously granted us such a “holy place,” together with detailed instructions for its construction. Why, you may ask, is the Ark to be two and a half cubits in length (Exodus 25:10)? And if it had been three cubits, would you not have asked?

I recall an incident a couple of decades ago, during a visit to my physician.

Another physician who shared the office had given a parent a prescription to remedy a child's ear infection, and he told the parent to apply the medicated salve once a week to each ear.

The parent insisted, “On what day shall I apply it?”

Despite the doctor's explanation that it just needed to be applied once a week to each ear, the parent insisted. Finally, the physician said, “On Mondays in the right ear, and on Thursdays in the left.”

Did it matter on which day of the week the medicine was administered? Of course not! But prescribing the details – even the irrelevant details – of the treatment strengthened the significance of the medication in the minds of the patient and the parent.

Similarly, it doesn't really matter that the Ark is to be two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half high, and a cubit and a half wide, nor are the other dimensions of the Sanctuary significant. But it matters very much that the details be prescribed, for following the building directions enables us to feel closer to the One Who gives the instructions. Following the prescribed directions for the construction of the Tabernacle and, later, of the Temple, is relational, and that is the most important thing of all.

To the finding of the relational in all the activities of our daily lives may we speedily be drawn.

Shabbat Shalom.