Is G-d Present in Our Consumption?
By Ariel Shalem, Parshat Terumah

Parshat Terumah is dedicated by Shlomo Shinnar, MD, PhD, in honor of Baruch Sheinson.

The Mishkan (Sanctuary), the traveling “House of G-d” built by the Israelites in the desert, is an elaborate structure built of royal and expensive materials. Reading the passages that describe its construction, one could easily be led to ask, “What does such a grandiose and this-worldly building have to do with G-d?” Yet the Mishkan is the epitome of Divine presence. The word Mishkan means “dwelling place” and about it G-d says, “They shall make a Sanctuary for Me — so that I may dwell among them.”¹

Parshat Terumah opens with an elaborate list of the materials that will be used in the building of the Mishkan and instruments within: “…gold, silver, and copper; and turquoise, purple, and scarlet wool; linen and goat hair; red-dyed ram skins, tachash skins, acacia wood; oil for illumination, spices for the anointment oil and the aromatic incense; shoham stones and stones for the settings, for the Ephod and the Breastplate.”²

About the forementioned wood, specifically, the Midrash Tanhuma³ on Parshat Terumah tells us that Jacob (Yaakov) received a prophecy that his descendents, while in the desert, would be instructed to build a Mishkan, a dwelling place for G-d. He subsequently planted saplings in the land of Israel and instructed his children to diligently transplant them to Egypt. By making this wise decision, Yaakov prepared a whole forest that would later supply the Mishkan with at least 800 cubic feet, or twenty tons, of usable wood.

Yaakov longed to participate in the building of the house of G-d, and took the necessary action to ensure his own involvement. Perhaps more significantly, Yaakov’s actions express the teaching of our sages “Who is wise? Those who foresee the consequences of their actions.”⁴ Yaakov had the wisdom to project the need for large amounts of wood in the Sinai desert, an environment that could not sustain wood. He therefore looked ahead and created a sustainable solution for the sacred needs of the Israelites.

We too, must look ahead and ask ourselves if we are creating sustainable environments for the needs of our children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren. Since the industrial revolution, our predecessors have not taken forest management seriously enough to warrant the respect that Yaakov earned for his foresight. In fact they, and we, have acted all too foolishly with the resources of G-d’s

¹Shemot 25:8 (translation by Artscroll Mesorah)
²Shemot 25:3-7
³Midrash Tanhuma on Parshat Terumah, chapter 9
⁴Babylonian Talmud, Tamid 32a
creation. Humankind, and in particular the industrialized West, has imprudently plundered one of earth’s most precious and critical resources.

Scientists give us some idea of what has been happening to the world’s forests: Half of the Earth’s land surface was once covered by forest, yet now half of those forests are gone; of all of the original forests that once covered the Earth, only 20 percent remain untouched; in North America alone, half of the coastal temperate rainforests that once stretched from Alaska to California have been destroyed; and turning to the world’s rain forests, somewhere between 750 to 800 million hectares of the planet’s original 1.5-1.6 billion hectares of mature tropical rain forests have been destroyed. Repercussions of such overuse and misuse include, in brief, an increase in the atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration, a major contributor to the greenhouse effect; disruption of the water cycle resulting in drier climates; soil erosion leading to the silting of water courses, lakes and dams; and the extinction of species that depend on the forest for survival.

The Midrash also analyzes the choice of acacia wood in the construction of the Mishkan, and explains that the Hebrew root of the word shitim, meaning acacia, shares the same root as the word shhoot, meaning folly. A connection is made: by building the Sanctuary out of this particular wood, we are reminded to rectify the folly that the Children of Israel pursued with the sin of the Golden Calf.

The Midrash’s link between acacia and the Golden Calf presents an almost funny, yet poignant connection to the current real-world correlation between deforestation and beef production. According to the Center for International Forestry Research, cattle ranching for beef has caused the majority of felled forests in Latin America — tens of thousands of square kilometers each year! In the Brazilian Amazon alone, the total area of deforestation rose from 41.5 million hectares in 1990 to 58.7 million hectares in 2000 — that is forest area the twice the size of Portugal lost in ten years alone. The overwhelming majority of that lost forest becomes pasture, and most of that pasture is used for grazing cattle, intended for eventual export on the international market. Modern-day beef consumption may thus represent the pursuit of our own material comfort at the expense of our forests.

Careless and selfish deforestation is also done to support urban sprawl, to build new highways, to build larger homes than we truly need and for endless amounts of packaging materials and paper goods. Natural resources such as forests are meant for us to use, but we must learn from Yaakov how to wisely use, reuse and replenish our natural resources. We must learn to avoid the “shtoot” and use the “shitim.”

The Sanctuary served as a microcosm for greater world harmony and was a Divine gesture to the children of Israel in response to the Golden Calf. We are given G-d’s world and the material within in order to construct a house for G-d — one of peace, harmony and sustainability. The world’s resources are not here so that we may construct false gods which cater to our wants and desires. The moment that we misuse the physical and degrade the planet, we go against the spirit of the wooden Sanctuary G-d commanded.

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5Report by the National Resources Defense Council www.nrdc.org/land/forests/fforestf.asp
7Midrash Tanhuma on Parshat Terumah, Chapter 10
We must ask ourselves: “Is G-d present in our consumption?” If so, then even the most ostentatious and elaborate materials that were used in the construction of the Mishkan are warranted. But if we have no awareness of our actions, and our consumption is a product of the pursuit of golden and flashy gods of consumer society, then we have not created a dwelling place for G-d in our actions or in the world.

Let us be blessed with the wisdom and foresight of our forefather Yaakov to provide sustainable and justified coexistence with the small remainder of G-d’s forests, and let us establish an awareness of the preciousness that pervades our natural world. By doing so, we will herald in a new era of human consciousness, and G-d will build the Third Temple as a testament to our efforts. As the prophet Isaiah said, “I will give in the desert cedars, acacia trees, all kinds of civilization. Even in them will I give all kinds of wisdom, goodness, and peace… In order that they see and know, and pay attention and understand together that the hand of the Lord did this and the Holy One of Israel created it.”

Suggested Action Items

1) Seriously limit your intake of meat as part of your commitment to avoid deforestation and other environmental “folly.” If and when you do buy meat, choose locally produced, organic meat from a source you trust.

2) Before buying something new, stop and consider why you are buying it. If it is for a holy purpose, go ahead. If it is to fill a void that might not be G-d-focused, think about choosing not to buy it.

Ariel Shalem is currently learning for Rabbinical ordination at the Bat Ayin Yeshiva in Israel’s Judean Hills. His family lives in a humble home overlooking a newly planted JNF forest. As an educator he often encourages his students to see the tshuva (repentence) process as one that must rectify mistakes between people and their environment. Ariel made aliyah 12 years ago and is committed to seeking a spiritually and environmentally conscious Israeli society that can serve as a role model for the world.

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9 Allegorical rendering following Rashi on Isaiah 41:19-20