



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

T'RUMA

People are the Sanctuary

A famous verse in this week's sidra tells us V'ASU LI MIKDASH V'SHACHANTI B'TOCHAM, "Let them make Me a sanctuary and I shall dwell in their midst" (Sh'mot 28:8).

There is a well-known interpretation that "I shall dwell in their midst" means "in the midst of the people", not merely "in the midst of the sanctuary". God dwells amidst the builders, not in the building.

This explains why the most magnificent place of worship is an empty, lifeless shell unless it houses a vibrant, devoted congregation.

It also explains a personal problem of my own. I have to explain that we have hundreds of visitors coming through the Great Synagogue, Sydney, every week. Most of the visitors are non-Jewish and have never been inside a synagogue before.

Some, however, are Jewish, generally tourists from other countries. We offer them guided tours at set times,

but the tourists frequently arrive on the doorstep at other times and insist that, regardless of our convenience, "We have to see the sanctuary" (it tends to be the tourists from the United States who use the phrase, "the sanctuary").

Obviously what they want is to look at the building. It is an impressive heritage building, and it has an impressive ambience and an impressive history.

But what these tourists never seem to have much time for (almost always they are leaving the same day or at best the day after) is to meet the congregation and to attend a service or congregational activity.

Tell them that it is the congregation who are the sanctuary and they will suspect that your intelligence is defective. But the fact is that without a congregation, a synagogue is just a piece of architecture; without human beings, a home is only a house.

Better than Gold

Understandably, the most valuable metal available - gold - was used in making the Ark of the Covenant - "And you shall overlay it with pure gold" (Sh'mot 25:11).

But if the gold was outside the ark, what was inside?

From the previous verse we learn that the answer was wood. Wood inside and gold outside - why was the Ark not made completely of gold? Surely gold is more precious and more durable than wood!

Surely the word of God deserves a completely golden repository, since the Psalmist says it is even more precious than gold (T'hilim 19:11) and the Book of Proverbs says (Mishlei 16:16) that it is better to get wisdom than gold. What could the Almighty have been thinking of when He commanded the use of wood?

A fascinating problem, but maybe the answer is that gold and wood each has a special quality. God wanted the gold to symbolise preciousness and permanence, but He wanted the wood to suggest the living nature of the Torah and its life-giving quality.

The Torah is EITZ CHAYIM, a tree of life (Mishlei 3:18). A tree is not inanimate like gold; it is a living thing, and not only does it have life but its branches give shelter and its fruit gives nourishment.

If the only casing the Torah had were gold, we might value it, cherish it and revere it, but we might not utilise it for daily inspiration and guidance.

-OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH