

The Golden Age or the Age of Failure?

What was the golden age of the people of Israel? Growing up, I was taught that the high point of Jewish history was the reign of Shlomo HaMelech. It was a time of peace and great prosperity. Spiritually, too, it was the time when the meager Mishkan, described in this week's parsha, was finally replaced by the magnificent Beis HaMikdash, Shlomo's most cherished achievement. Today, we view it as a place of special connection with God, which we no longer have in the Beis HaMikdash's absence. We miss a spiritual connection that we don't even know. We just know that we lack spiritually now that it's gone, and we yearn to regain that connection in its future rebuilding.

On the other hand, one can view the Beis HaMikdash as a massive failure. Rather than enhancing godliness in the world, the Beis HaMikdash quickly developed into the feared scenario that God warned against:

Then the word of God came to Solomon: 'With regard to this House you are building—if you follow My laws and observe My rules and faithfully keep My commandments, I will fulfill for you the promise that I gave to your father David: I will abide among the children of Israel, and I will never forsake My people Israel.

(1 Kings 6:11-13)

God conditions the Beis HaMikdash on Shlomo's behavior, telling him, "If you follow the Torah, and lead the people to do so, then I will protect this structure." Perhaps, should this scenario play out, it would serve as proof of concept for the utility of the Beis HaMikdash — apparently it encourages people to act righteously. In that case, "I will abide among the children of Israel [via the Beis HaMikdash], and I will not leave My people Israel." However, these verses imply that if Shlomo does not follow the ways of God, then God would cease to abide among the children of Israel [by leaving the Beis HaMikdash], and would leave the people of Israel. Should such a scenario play out, we would learn that that the structure actually detracts from the service of God. Better to have it gone.

The warned-against scenario ultimately came to be. We used the Beis HaMikdash as a substitute for acting appropriately to one another. We came to side with power and oppress the weak. And on top of that, rather than prioritizing the service of God, and understanding the Beis HaMikdash as merely supportive of, and subservient to, that service, we flipped the priorities! We saw the existence of the Beis HaMikdash as proof that God approved of our conduct:

"The word that came to Jeremiah from God:

Stand at the gate of the House of God, and there proclaim this word: Hear the word of God, all you of Judah who enter these gates to worship God!

Thus said God of Hosts, the God of Israel: Mend your ways and your actions, and I will let you dwell in this place.

Don't put your trust in illusions and say, "The Temple of God, the Temple of God (*Heichal haShem!* *Heichal haShem!*), the Temple of God are these [buildings]."

No, if you really mend your ways and your actions; if you execute justice between one party and another;

if you do not oppress the stranger, the orphan, and the widow; if you do not shed the blood of the innocent in this place; if you do not follow other gods, to your own hurt—

then only will I let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your ancestors for all time.

See, you are relying on illusions that are of no avail.

Will you steal and murder and commit adultery and swear falsely, and sacrifice to Baal, and follow other gods whom you have not experienced,

and then come and stand before Me in this House that bears My name and say, “We are safe”?—[Safe] to do all these abhorrent things!

Do you consider this House, which bears My name, to be a den of thieves? As for Me, I have been watching—declares God.

Just go to My place at Shiloh, where I had established My name formerly, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of My people Israel.

And now, because you do all these things—declares God—and though I spoke to you persistently, you would not listen; and though I called to you, you would not respond—therefore I will do to the House that bears My name, on which you rely, and to the place that I gave you and your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh.

And I will cast you out of My presence as I cast out your kinsfolk, the whole brood of Ephraim.

As for you, do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry of prayer on their behalf, do not plead with Me; for I will not listen to you.

Don't you see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem?”

(Jeremiah 7:1-17)

How did the Beis HaMikdash become such a colossal failure? I believe that we can find what went so wrong in the differences between the Mishkan and the Beis HaMikdash.

Purpose

The Mishkan was built for the people, as a place for the people to serve and meet God. The Beis HaMikdash was not for the people, but for God. The idea is for God to reside in the Beis HaMikdash. It is a house. A Bayis. God comes down, and is present inside the building:

“When the priests came out of the sanctuary—for the cloud had filled the House of God and the priests were not able to remain and perform the service because of the cloud, for the Presence of the Eternal filled the House of God.

Then Solomon declared:

‘God has chosen to abide in a thick cloud:

I have now built for You a stately House,

A place where You may dwell forever.”

(1 Kings 8:10-13)

The Mishkan was not a house, a permanent residence for God. It was a meeting point - an ohel moed - where people come to serve God, and in turn, God comes down and dwells in and around the Mishkan to meet the people:

“A regular burnt offering throughout the generations, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting before Hashem. For there I will meet with you, and there I will speak with you, and there I will meet with the Israelites, and it shall be sanctified by My Presence.”

(Exodus 29:42-43)

The Mishkan does not contain God's presence, as in the Beis HaMikdash. God's presence engulfs the Mishkan inside and out:

“The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of haShem filled the Tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of Hashem filled the Tabernacle.”

(Exodus 40:34-35)

This functional distinction is found in the words used to describe the two structures - a bayis, to “house” God, versus a Mishkan, where God “dwells” but is not housed within. This follows David's rationale in the first place to build the Temple:

“The king said to the prophet Nathan: ‘Here I am dwelling in a house of cedar, while the Ark of the Lord abides in a tent!’”

(2 Samuel 7:2)

While David's rationale for the Beis HaMikdash sounds reasonable, the logic doesn't follow, as no house can possibly contain God. Shlomo knows this, and says so during his supplication during the inauguration ceremony:

“But will God really dwell on earth? Even the heavens to their uttermost reaches cannot contain You, how much less this House that I have built!”

(1 Kings 8:27-28)

God's presence engulfing the Mishkan versus God's presence contained within the Beis HaMikdash meant a great deal to the average Israelite. With the Mishkan, an average Israelite can stand outside and commune with God. With the Beis Hamikdash, people need special access to enter the highly controlled building in order to experience God's presence. For the masses, the closeness they used to experience was now cut off behind the velvet rope. It may as well have left altogether.

Whose project? The People's Tent vs. The King's Temple

The Mishkan was a project of the people, created by the combined contributions of anyone that wanted to take part. Anyone who wanted to contribute did so with whatever means they had, be it material or skill:

“And everyone who excelled in ability and everyone whose spirit was moved came, bringing to haShem an offering for the work of the Tent of Meeting and for all its service and for the sacral vestments. Men and women, all whose hearts moved them, all who would make an elevation offering of gold to haShem, came bringing brooches, earrings, rings, and pendants —gold objects of all kinds. And everyone who possessed blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats' hair, tanned ram skins, and dolphin skins, brought them;

everyone who would make gifts of silver or copper brought them as gifts for haShem; and everyone who possessed acacia wood for any work of the service brought that.
And all the skilled women spun with their own hands, and brought what they had spun, in blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and in fine linen.
And all the women who excelled in that skill spun the goats' hair.
And the chieftains brought lapis lazuli and other stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece;
and spices and oil for lighting, for the anointing oil, and for the aromatic incense.
Thus the Israelites, all the men and women whose hearts moved them to bring anything for the work that haShem, through Moses, had commanded to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to haShem."
(Exodus 35:21-29)

The outpouring from the people was so great that it had to be stopped!:

"They took over from Moses all the gifts that the Israelites had brought, to carry out the tasks connected with the service of the sanctuary. But when these continued to bring freewill offerings to him morning after morning,
all the artisans who were engaged in the tasks of the sanctuary came, from the task upon which each one was engaged,
and said to Moses, "The people are bringing more than is needed for the tasks entailed in the work that haShem has commanded to be done."
Moses thereupon had this proclamation made throughout the camp: 'Let no man or woman make further effort toward gifts for the sanctuary!' So the people stopped bringing:
their efforts had been more than enough for all the tasks to be done."
(Exodus 36:4-7)

In contrast, the Beis HaMikdash was the project of an individual. An individual with vast power, working with assistance from another powerful individual. Rather than turning the people, Shlomo first turns to Chiram, the king of Tzur, because Chiram possessed rare and great trees that Shlomo wanted to use:

"Envoys came from all peoples to hear Solomon's wisdom, [sent] by all the monarchs of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.
King Hiram of Tyre sent his officials to Solomon when he heard that he had been anointed king in place of his father; for Hiram had always been a friend of David.
Solomon sent this message to Hiram:
"You know that my father David could not build a house for the name of the Eternal his God because of the enemies that encompassed him, until God had placed them under the soles of his feet.
But now the Eternal my God has given me respite all around; there is no adversary and no mischance.
And so I propose to build a house for the name of the Eternal my God, as the Eternal promised my father David, saying, 'Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place, shall build the house for My name.'
Please, then, give orders for cedars to be cut for me in the Lebanon. My servants will work with yours, and I will pay you any wages you may ask for your servants; for as you know, there is none among us who knows how to cut timber like the Sidonians."
When Hiram heard Solomon's message, he was overjoyed. "Praised be God this day," he said, "for granting David a wise son to govern this great people."
(1 Kings 5:14-21)

The Labor Force

And what about labor? For the Mishkan, people volunteered. So much so that people had to be turned away. The Beis HaMikdash was built through slavery. Both Hiram and Shlomo imposed forced labor on their subjects to obtain and transport all the materials:

“So Hiram sent word to Solomon: “I have your message; I will supply all the cedar and cypress logs you require.

My servants will bring them down to the sea from the Lebanon; and at the sea I will make them into floats and [deliver them] to any place that you designate to me. There I shall break them up for you to carry away. You, in turn, will supply the food I require for my household.”

So Hiram kept Solomon provided with all the cedar and cypress wood he required, and Solomon delivered to Hiram 20,000 *kors* of wheat as provisions for his household and 20 *kors* of beaten oil. Such was Solomon’s annual payment to Hiram.

God had given Solomon wisdom, just as promised. There was friendship between Hiram and Solomon, and the two of them made a treaty.

King Solomon imposed forced labor on all Israel; the levy came to 30,000 men.

He sent them to the Lebanon in shifts of 10,000 a month: they would spend one month in the Lebanon and two months at home. Adoniram was in charge of the forced labor.

Solomon also had 70,000 porters and 80,000 quarriers in the hills, apart from Solomon’s 3,300 officials who were in charge of the work and supervised the gangs doing the work.

The king ordered huge blocks of choice stone to be quarried, so that the foundations of the house might be laid with hewn stones.

Solomon’s masons, Hiram’s masons, and those from Gebal shaped them. Thus the timber and the stones for building the house were made ready.”

(1 Kings 5:22-32)

Appearance

The different purposes, approaches, and processes of the structures manifested in the structures’ vastly different appearances. The Mishkan looks “tribal”: shaggy, made of cloth, and beautiful in its jumble of colors. The shagginess of clothwork contains the imprints of people’s passions, artistry, and flaws. The various colors reflect the diversity of hands involved in the creation. The Mishkan itself says, “I am the product of the people’s thirst to serve you and meet you.”

The Beis HaMikdash is grand, pristine, immaculate and orderly. The walls and floor are made of stone, tile, and gold, exhibiting the light and pale colors associated with contemporary architecture, similar to the Jerusalem stone of the second Temple that we see today. The massive, perfectly cut, bright stones exhibited machine-like cleanliness and precision, rather than the human, inherently imperfect clothwork of the Mishkan. Instead of the Mishkan’s intimacy, the Beis HaMikdash radiated grandeur. And power. The power of a King.

Power — Glory to God or Self Deification?

The Beis HaMikdash was the vision of a king, built by the demands of that king’s power over his people, and the resulting structure bore these marks. Despite David’s intentions of creating it for God, despite Shlomo’s acknowledgment that the structure is secondary to the priorities of justice and compassion, and

despite the divine warnings against the dangers, the decision to build it, like Bnei Yisroel's decision to opt for monarchy, was also a siding with power. Shlomo even ties the Beis HaMikdash to his family's dynasty, despite his claims of building it to glorify God:

Then Solomon stood before the altar of God in the presence of the whole community of Israel; he spread the palms of his hands toward heaven and said, "O Eternal God of Israel, in the heavens above and on the earth below there is no god like You, who keep Your gracious covenant with Your servants when they walk before You in wholehearted devotion; You who have kept the promises You made to Your servant, my father David, fulfilling with deeds the promise You made—as is now the case. And now, O Eternal God of Israel, keep the further promise that You made to Your servant, my father David: 'Your line on the throne of Israel shall never end, if only your descendants will look to their way and walk before Me as you have walked before Me.' Now, therefore, O God of Israel, let the promise that You made to Your servant my father David be fulfilled.

(1 Kings 8:22-26)

This is not to say that Shlomo's efforts to fortify his kingdom and build the Beis HaMikdash were self-serving. These goals were set forth in God's prophecy to Nossan HaNavi, which he told to David haMelech, that David's lineage would continue forever, and that David would have an offspring who would build a house for God's name (2 Samuel 7:4-17). The problem was his fusing of the house for God's name with the monarchy, and the resultant equation of service of the Crown with service of God. By subsuming the central house of worship under his kingship, by re-creating it using power to create a structure that projects power, service of God meant serving the kingdom and contributing to its everlasting power. It made the existence of the monarchy as essential to the will of God as the Torah's basic principles of *tzedek u'mishpat* and treating people as beings created in the image of God.

The Result

With the Temple of God so connected to the power of monarchy, it's no wonder that the Beis HaMikdash quickly became a political battleground, in both the first and second Temples. The Beis HaMikdash represented the seat of political power. He who controlled the Beis HaMikdash controlled the people. So it was natural and strategic that, following the revolt and split of Israel's kingdom into two, Yeravam, king of the newly formed kingdom of northern Israel, built his own Batei Mikdash. Aside from their function of diverting his subjects from the other kingdom, the temples served to legitimize his power. After all, how could you have such a grand temple without God living inside? And would God live inside the temple of an illegitimate sinner of a king?

Power's Course

While some may see the kingdom of Shlomo and the building of the Beis HaMikdash as the high point of Bnei Yisroel's history, a high point is also the beginning of decline. Our efforts to seek and attain power via a king, and the licensing of God's name to legitimize the endeavor, marked a period of wealth, followed by power struggles, fragmentation, moral decline, and finally, destruction.

The course of the Beis HaMikdash repeats itself in the Second Temple. What began as a grassroots project of the people (see Ezra chapter 3) ultimately morphed into another magnificent, grandiose structure of splendor by another king — the Roman King Herod. And the Temple became, yet again, a political, and ultimately physical, battlefield, until its destruction.

The Mishkan reminds us of our original identity as people who sought a genuine relationship with God and with one another. It is a celebration of our diverse contributions to the ideals of tzedek u'mishpat, and of treating people with the dignity due to them as creations formed b'tzelem Elohim.

This evaluation of the Beis HaMikdash is no doubt in tension with the fact that we frequently pray for the melech hamoshiach and the rebuilding of the Beis HaMikdash. I do not have comprehensive solutions to this problem. What can be done to avoid these problems in the future, assuming a Beis HaMikdash and a king? Perhaps there is a way to have a king with adequate checks on power? Maybe the Beis HaMikdash could be built and treated more as a mishkan than a bayis, and with enforced separation of mikdash and state? I do not know. I do know that, even without a vision of moshiach that satisfactorily addresses the pitfalls of the prior batei mikdash, we have to learn from what went wrong.

Have We Learned Anything? Can We?

We again have political power over the land. Sadly, we find ourselves following the same trajectory as in the past. Just as in the past, we yelled "*heichal Hashem, heichal Hashem*" to use the Beis HaMikdash as evidence that God is on our side, which in turn led us to conclude that 1) despite our society's obvious moral rot, we're actually righteous (the most moral!), 2) criticism of the people of Israel must also be an attack on God, justifying vilification and punishment of those who speak out against their people's crimes (see the executed prophet Uriyah in Yirmiyahu 26:20-23), and 3) there is no need to consider the consequences of our actions from external forces because God is on our side and will protect us. Similarly, today, our people's certainty that the State of Israel is *the* manifestation of the irreversible third and *final* geulah, has led to the same arrogance, the same undeserved conviction in our righteousness and invincibility, the same resistance to self criticism, the same blindness to, and denial of, our moral decline, the same abuses of power, the same normalization of abuse, the same protection of the abusers over their victims, the same institutionalized cruelty, the same willful ignorancel of our crimes, the same attacks on those who cry out against our wrongdoings, and the same apathy to the cries of the oppressed.

While history paints a grim prognosis, belief in Moshiach means belief that things can change. Maybe this time, if we cry out together against the injustice rather than rely on a few nevi'im to bear the consequences, we can change the outcome. Maybe we will learn from the past and reorient our approach to God, from the God of power to the God who values each person as a unique version of the image of God. Maybe when we daven for the Beis HaMikdash, we will imagine a structure like the Mishkan, a center of worship that emerges from individuals' contributions of their unique talents, abilities, and resources, to serve God and do right. A structure and community full of beauty, color, vibrancy and intimacy, of deep connection and commitment to God, to people, and to the values we are tasked to uphold.

Table

Mishkan	Beis Hamikdash
Project of the people	Project of an individual
Built by voluntary effort	Built by forced labor
Colorful, “tribal” style	Pristine, “contemporary” style
Radiated intimacy	Projected grandeur and power
Ohel moed - A meeting point with God	Bayis - A house for God
Enveloped within God’s presence	God’s presence contained inside
God’s presence visible to the public	God’s presence only for the elite few
Non-political	The seat of political power

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