

D'var Torah - T'rumah 5769 – Exodus 25:1 – 27:19

Parashat T'rumah details the construction of the mishkan, the portable temple the Jews built and took with them during their 40 year journey through the wilderness. The early rabbis noticed the high frequency of similar words used in this story of the creation of a holy sanctuary and the language used in Genesis to describe creation.

The portable temple – the mishkan – is the Torah's early preview of the permanent Temple that would be built centuries later by King Solomon in Jerusalem. Jon Levenson, a Bible scholar and the teacher of my Bible professor, wrote that the parallels between the Torah's account of the creation of the universe and the Exodus chapters detailing the creation of the mishkan provide "powerful evidence that, as in many cultures, the Temple was conceived as a microcosm, a miniature world."

For this week's Torah portion, the rabbis chose a haftarah, the public reading from the books of the Prophets that accompanies the weekly Torah reading, from the book of First Kings. That text describes Solomon's building of the first Temple in Jerusalem. One of the most commented upon verses we find in the description of this massive construction project reads as follows: **When the Temple was built, only finished stones cut at the quarry were used, so that no hammer or ax or any iron tool was heard in the Temple while it was being built.**

וְהַבֵּית, בְּהִבְנֹתוֹ--אֶבֶן-שְׁלֵמָה מִסָּע, נִבְנָה ; וּמִקְבוֹת וְהַגְרָזָן כָּל-כְּלִי
בְרִזָּל, לֹא-נִשְׁמַע בַּבַּיִת בְּהִבְנֹתוֹ.

The Talmud records a somewhat famous *aggadah*, or legend, about how King Solomon managed to fulfill this commandment from God not to use any of these routinely needed tools to cut and shape the rocks taken from the quarry in order to build the Temple. This account is found in the tractate of the Babylonian Talmud known as Gittin. What it says is this:

Solomon went to the sages of his time and asked how he was supposed to be able to go ahead with the construction project without these tools. They replied to him that the one way he could do it was to obtain a magical creature, the *shamir*. The *shamir* was a tiny worm that had the wonderous power of being able to cut through the hardest substances on earth. The rabbinic tradition produced a lot of midrash – a lot of interpretive and imaginative lore – about this amazing creature. The *shamir* was, according to midrash, one of the miraculous creatures that God made in the waning hours of the final, sixth day of creation. The *shamir* was used by Moses to engrave the names of each of the 12 tribes of Israel on the precious gemstones that were mounted upon the breastplate of the first high priest, Aaron. And because the *shamir* could cut through any hard substance at all, there was no way to contain it in any kind of box. Ultimately, the only way it could be possessed by a human being was to place it in a soft mesh of fibers and then encase that in a soft lead capsule.”

When Solomon's advisers told him to use the *shamir* to cut the rocks from the quarry, he asked them how to find it. They told him that the only way to find the location of the *shamir* was to capture two demons, a male and a female, tie them up, and refuse to release them until they said where it might be. I realize that some of you might be thinking to yourselves, "Demons? I didn't know Judaism believed in demons." Well, this is an example of how Jewish ideas and beliefs have changed and evolved over the centuries. For millennia there has been a Jewish philosophical tradition that has pooh-poohed the idea of demons and evil spirits. But for much of Jewish history, people also believed in all sorts of angelic and demonic beings, and as you'll see, the story of how Solomon sought out the *shamir* is filled with these magical and powerful beings.

King Solomon was renowned for his ability to use his mental and spiritual power to control demons, and so he went ahead and captured a female and a male demon and demanded that they tell him what they knew about the *shamir*. They said they didn't know where it was, but that Ashmadai, the prince of all the demons, did know, and they told the king where Ashmadai lived. Ashmadai's home was a far-off mountain. The two demons told Solomon that Ashmadai was so worried that someone would try to poison him that he had dug a pit near the mountain and kept it filled with drinking water. He kept the pit sealed in a special way so that he could tell if anyone had opened it while he was away.

The king sent a man named Benayahu to Ashmadai's dwelling. He gave Benayahu several things: a chain and a ring, each inscribed with the four-letter sacred Name of the Eternal One, as well as a good deal of wool material and many bottles of wine. Benayahu journeyed to Ashmadai's mountain and dug a pit underneath the bottom of the arch demon's water pit, thus draining all the water out. He then stopped up the hole in the bottom of the pit with the wool. Then he walked to ground above the pit, dug down until he had bored a new hole into the top of the water pit, and filled the demon's pit with wine. He stopped up this hole with wool as well, and then he waited for Ashmedai to return home.

When Ashmedai came to his pit, it appeared not to have been tampered with, but when he opened it he saw that it was full of wine. He didn't drink it for several days, but then he became impossibly thirsty and finally drank, became drunk, and fell asleep. Benayahu seized his chance and threw the chain with the Divine name around the demon. When Ashmadai woke up, he tried to struggle free, but he couldn't because of the power of God's name on the chain and on Benayahu's ring.

As Benayahu brought Ashmadai back to King Solomon in Jerusalem, the Talmud recounts many adventures which, because of limited time, I'm going to skip for now. When Solomon finally came in to see him in his jail, Ashmadai accused the king of greed. "You have a great kingdom and yet that's not enough for you – you feel the need to subdue me, too, don't you." Solomon responded, "I want nothing of you. What I want is to build the Temple and I require the *shamir*. Where is it?"

Ashmadai said, "I am not the keeper of the *shamir*. The Prince of the Sea has it, and the only one he lends it to is the woodpecker, who has sworn an oath to him to guard it."

King Solomon asked, “What does this bird do with the *shamir*?”

Ashmadai answered, “He takes it to a mountain where there are no trees and he puts the *shamir* on the edge of large sections of rock. The *shamir* cuts through the rock and the woodpecker then drops seeds from the trees into the new openings, and trees then grow there.”

King Solomon sent a team led by Benayahu out to the woodpecker’s forest, and they found her nest there with young in it. They covered the nest with white glass. When she flew back to the nest, she could not penetrate the glass, so she brought the *shamir* and placed it on the glass. The *shamir* began to cut through the glass. When the woodpecker picked up the *shamir* again, Benayahu gave a loud shout and the woodpecker dropped it. Benayahu captured the *shamir* and headed back to Jerusalem.

King Solomon then used the *shamir* to construct the Temple, and he kept Ashmadai prisoner until the structure was completed. As long as Ashmadai was wrapped in the chain bearing the sacred Divine name upon it, he could not escape.

The story then takes an interesting and tragic turn. King Solomon was a man who craved wisdom and knowledge, and he felt fascinated by what he could learn from a being like Ashmedai, Prince of the Demons. The Talmud states that Ashmedai would spend the day traveling up to Heaven studying in the heavenly academy (for the rabbis, Heaven is a place of Talmud study – what else?). Ashmedai knew many secrets of the workings of the world and had much deep knowledge that he could potentially share with Solomon. One day the king visited Ashmedai alone in his prison and asked him to share the secret of why the angels and the demons had power over human beings. Ashmedai told him he would tell him if the king took off the magical chain that bound him and gave him the ring that bore the sacred Divine name, just for a moment, so that he could explain it to him. Despite his own grave reservations, Solomon couldn’t resist, and he impulsively did as the great demon asked. The instant he did so, Ashmedai stretched himself to his full enormous size and swallowed King Solomon. Then he spat him a distance of four hundred parsangs, which was to say into a far, far remote land Solomon had never heard of. This story of Ashmedai’s hurling of Solomon into a distant land forms the start of an entirely other epic saga of midrash. According to that story, once Solomon was gone, Ashmedai assumed the king’s physical form and ruled in his stead for several years. Meanwhile, Solomon became a wandering beggar, relying on the kindness of strangers and composing the book Ecclesiastes, which presents the king famously reflecting on the fleeting nature of all earthly things, including wealth and power, youth and wisdom.

Wow, what a story! And you thought building a new home was difficult in this economic climate.

A contemporary rabbi, Elisa Koppel, writes this about Solomon’s search for the *shamir* worm:

The Talmudic story teaches us that in order to get the one thing he needs to build the structure of ultimate goodness, Solomon must go to Ashmedai, the most evil of creatures. The *shamir* is brought by Solomon so that no iron tool would be heard in the

House of God; the material of weapons could not be brought into a place of peace. The lesson of the *shamir* is that it is only through conflict that true peace can exist. We often try to avoid conflict, when in fact inconsistency is necessary and even useful to our growth and development. It is only when we embrace the conflict and contradiction in our lives that we are able to find the peace that we seek. Solomon had to go through a turbulent quest in order to find the *shamir*. So, too, it is often only after we endure our own tests that we can find the key to building our own Temple.

To put it a little differently, King Solomon has to “face his demon” before he can acquire the needed element for building a temple of non-violence. The violence in the story of his adventurous quest is directed into the realm of demons and magical creatures – in other words, the realm of the psyche. This is an example of what Muslim tradition refers to as the inner jihad, the internal struggle to find a healthy, peaceful path.

There are some traditions that state that in addition to imprisoning Ashmedai, King Solomon also tricked the powerful demon into assisting with the construction of the Temple. Thought of this way, the story becomes a possible allegory for putting our demonic dimensions of self to constructive purposes – but perhaps an act of conscious cleverness and skill is needed to redirect this demonic or evil energy towards good purposes. We can’t build the temple without integrating our dark side, without finding a way to include and re-direct those energies within us that can potentially be destructive, selfish, and cruel.

I’m also struck by the Talmudic passages that state that Solomon was replaced by Ashmodai as king for a while. We could read this as a hint that Ashmodai represents an aspect of Solomon.

I’ll wrap up tonight with some questions.

- ✓ What does it take to create peace, to overcome violent responses to conflict; and what do the adventurous midrashic traditions about Solomon and the *shamir* have to suggest to us in this regard?
- ✓ Can we only build a temple of peace if we refrain from using all tools of violence? Are peaceful means the only way to create peace? Is that what we are to learn from the commandment to Solomon not to allow the use of iron tools – the tools of war – in the construction of the Temple? Or do we live in a less pure and simple kind of world than that?
- ✓ And what is it about stories of ancient quests for mysterious objects of great power that so compels us? Why are we so drawn to them? Do they hint at our own personal experiences of our desire to understand the deepest mysteries of life?

Shabbat shalom.