Splendor and Beauty: Thoughts for Parashat Tetsaveh

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Tetsaveh

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The Torah goes to extensive detail in describing how the Mishkan (sanctuary) was to be built. In this week's Torah portion, it describes the garments to be worn by the High Priest as being "for splendor and for beauty." The lesson: material things matter even in spiritual contexts. The sanctuary was to be beautiful. The priestly garments were to be glorious.

These external features served to create a mood of sanctity. When one entered the holy precincts, one was immediately conscious of being in a special and unique environment. In seeing the elaborately decorated sanctuary and the handsomely dressed High Priest, the worshiper was impacted by a pavlovian sense of awe. The physical "splendor and beauty" set the stage for spiritual fulfillment.

What would happen, though, if upon entering the sanctuary the worshiper found papers strewn on the floor or other litter scattered about randomly? What impression would be made if the priests arrived late for the service, or if they chatted and joked with each other? What if the High Priest was busy reading a book rather than attending to the ceremonies of the sanctuary? What if the others who attended the sanctuary were busy socializing rather than focusing on the service? The physical sanctuary was still beautiful. The priestly robes were still glorious. But somehow, the sense of holiness would be dramatically missing.

What makes holiness is not merely the physical structure or priestly garments or technical ceremony: holiness is evoked by the spirit of reverence which people bring to the sanctuary. If the ingredient of holiness is missing from the participants in the service, then the physical beauty and splendor become empty shells. The body may be intact, but the soul is missing.

The Mishkan and the later Temples in Jerusalem set the model for Jewish worship. The physical structures and accouterments were splendid; and the spiritual content of the service was to be conducted with proper devotion. When the spirit of holiness was absent among the priests and among the people, the Divine Presence itself was driven from the Temple.

The Shulhan Arukh, the classic code of Jewish law, has a special section on the sanctity of the synagogue (Orah Hayyim 151). The laws underscore the separateness and specialness of this sacred structure. It is forbidden to act in a light-headed fashion in synagogues. Silly laughter, extraneous conversation, eating and drinking are forbidden in these holy places. If one finds people talking and joking, one feels that the holiness of the synagogue has been defiled. The sanctity of synagogues is not only exemplified by the rules governing behavior within them; the physical structure must be respected. The Shulhan Arukh notes that it is customary to keep synagogues clean and to light candles in them as a sign of honor.

If one enters a synagogue and sees papers, books and prayer shawls strewn around, one feels that the sanctuary has been diminished. Synagogues reflect a community's religious and aesthetic values. By insisting on the physical beauty and orderliness of the Mishkan and priestly garments, the Torah teaches the importance of maintaining sacred spaces in a respectful and dignified manner. By insisting on reverence and respectfulness in synagogues, the halakha teaches the importance of bringing the spirit of holiness into the sacred precincts.

When we enter a synagogue, we are seeking to experience holiness, a connection with the Almighty, a feeling of transcendence. The physical beauty and dignity of the sanctuary help set the mood for spiritual engagement. The sincere devotion of clergy and fellow congregants help deepen our sense of the Divine Presence. When the physical and spiritual qualities of the synagogue are at their best, they raise us to the highest levels of religious experience. When the physical and spiritual qualities are diminished, they impinge on our religious aspirations and drag us down.

When we enter a synagogue, we should feel the "splendor and the beauty" of this sacred space, and we should participate in the "splendor and the beauty" of a community genuinely at prayer.

Angel for Shabbat