# Facing our Faces: Thoughts for Parashat Terumah

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In his book, “Creativity, The Magic Synthesis” (Basic Books, 1976), the late psychiatrist Dr. Silvano Arieti discussed the process of creating a work of art. The artist perceives something directly and then attempts to interpret it through imagery. Various processes are at work. “Preceding thoughts and feelings about an object affect the way he perceives it directly. In other words, past experiences of the object—everything he knows and feels about it—influence the way he sees that object” (p. 194).

This is true not only of artists, but of everyone. How we perceive reality is shaped by our memories, sensitivities, experiences and our general attitudes. Different people can see the identical thing…but have entirely different reactions. An optimist and a pessimist experience the half- filled glass of water based on their own internal worldviews.

This week’s Torah portion describes the components for building the Mishkan, the sanctuary that accompanied the Israelites during their wanderings in the wilderness. Among the features was a table upon which the “lehem hapanim”—showbreads--were to be placed. Vayikra 24:5-9 notes that there were to be 12 loaves arranged in two rows, and that these loaves were to be replaced each week on the Sabbath.

The term “lehem hapanim” is not easy to translate. While the usual translation is “showbreads,” it also has been translated as bread of the Presence, or more literally as bread of the faces.

The Hassidic Rebbe Avraham Mordechai of Gur offered a unique insight into the “lehem hapanim.” Each person who looked at the bread could see an image of his or her own face! A pious, kind and faithful person would see the bread as being fresh and warm. A cynical, mean and skeptical person would see the bread as being stale and cold. The “lehem hapanim” reflected the face—and the inner being—of the observer.

The bread was the same bread: but the experience of the bread varied according to the personality of the person who observed it. The lesson: one must strive to develop a positive worldview so as to be able to experience life in a positive way.

This idea is also reflected in a teaching of the Kotsker Rebbe on Shemoth 15:23: “And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they [i.e. the waters] were bitter.” The plain meaning of the text is that the Israelites couldn’t drink the water because it was too bitter. The Kotsker Rebbe, though, interpreted the verse as follows: “And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they—the Israelites—were bitter.” Because they were in such a foul and bitter mood, everything seemed wrong, even the water tasted bitter. Reality was experienced through the prism of a negative worldview.

Judeo-Spanish-speaking Jews would refer to some people as “mal de contentar,” malcontents who never seemed satisfied with life. Others were “cara de Tisha b’Av,” people with sour, sad outlooks, whose faces always seemed to be in a Tisha b’Av mood. But, fortunately, there were also those with “cara de risas,” smiling, happy faces who added cheer wherever they were. And there were “bonachos,” and “bonachas” whose goodness shone from their faces and whose company was always welcome.

We each have the power to define who we are and how we face life. We each shape our external experiences by our internal attitudes.

Angel for Shabbat