

PLANNING FOR OUR FUTURE

THE MOST IMPORTANT INVESTMENT WE WILL EVER MAKE

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



“THE MERE ACT OF SITTING IN A SHUL WITHOUT DOING ANYTHING ELSE – JUST SITTING THERE – IS A MITZVAH!”

AT THE BEGINNING OF PARSHAS TERUMAH, HASHEM commands Moshe to ask that the people come forward with voluntary donations of various materials: gold, silver, copper, precious stones, dyed wools and animal skins, spices and oil, and atzei shitim – wood known as shitim. We are then commanded by Hashem to use these materials to build a mikdash – a beis kedusha¹ – a place of holiness – so that Hashem can dwell among us.²

Rashi³ quotes a midrash that asks: “Where did they get shitim wood in the midbar, the wilderness, where we wandered for 40 years and where shitim trees are not found?”

And the midrash answers: “Ya’akov Avinu (our forefather Jacob) foresaw through ruach hakodesh (Divine inspiration) that Israel would be commanded to build a

mishkan in the midbar. So he brought shitim trees to Egypt and planted them there. And he instructed his sons to take these shitim trees with them, when they would eventually leave Egypt.”

From the time that Ya’akov went down to Egypt until the time that his children would be redeemed from that very same place was more than 200 years.⁴ And yet at the time that Ya’akov was busy preparing to leave Eretz Yisrael and go down to Egypt – he didn’t concern himself with planning for his retirement, or with making sure that he had sufficient savings, or with writing his will, but instead he concerned himself with what he foresaw that his great-great-great-great grandchildren would need in order to serve Hashem hundreds of years later.

Our sages teach that a shul is likened to the mikdash that Hashem commanded us to build in the midbar. In fact, they tell us that a shul is called a mikdash me’at – a miniature mikdash – a miniature holy place⁵, and that, as was the case with the mishkan itself, there is kedusha gedolah – a great holiness – in a shul.⁶ Just what makes a shul so holy? They answer that it’s because we pray and we study Torah in the shul.⁷

So special is the shul that our sages teach that if a person sets aside a fixed place in his private home as his own personal study hall – his own personal Beis Medrash if you will – it doesn’t have the same level of kedusha – of holiness – as a communal Beis Medrash or a shul.⁸

In its discussion of how one should

behave in a shul, the *Shulchan Aruch* – the famous Code of Jewish Law – notes that if a person needs to enter into the shul because of some need, for example, to call someone out from inside there, it says the person should first stop and learn a bit of Chumash or say a halacha (a Jewish law) or a mishna, and only then approach the person that he wishes to call.⁹ *The Shulchan Aruch* notes that, if a person doesn't know how to learn any of these things, then he should ask one of the children sitting there to read him a verse from the Chumash¹⁰, or at the very least, the person should pause and sit a moment – because just the mere act of sitting in a shul without doing anything else – just sitting there – is a mitzvah!¹¹ And he brings as his source for this idea the oft recited tefilla known as Ashrei: “ashrei yoshvei vei'secha”¹² – praiseworthy are those who sit in Your house.

A man is meant to daven with a tzibur – a group.¹³ There's a special koach (strength) when we get together as a community for prayer. What is so special about davening as a group? Our sages teach that it's because Hashem doesn't reject the tefilla (prayer) of

a group!¹⁴ And because “the King (ie, Hashem) is glorified when there is a multitude”¹⁵ of people gathered together.¹⁶

It's brought in halacha that if a person is unable to daven with the group at the scheduled time for the service, and as a result he has to daven alone, then he should, at the very least, daven in the shul!¹⁷ Why should this be so? Because the shul is a place that has been permanently established for holiness, and the prayers that are davened in a shul are more readily accepted by Hashem.¹⁸

We read each Rosh Hashanah about Chana praying for a son, a son who would grow up to become Shmuel HaNavi (the prophet Samuel). She was desperate for Hashem to accept her prayers. So where did she go to pray? She went to the mikdash; she went to a place of holiness.¹⁹

People tend to spend a lot of time living in the past, reminiscing about what has been, or at best, living for the present – for the moment. For a Jew, however, our focus is all about the future, and as we see from our forefather Jacob – the distant future at that.

A shul is supposed to be the most forward-thinking place there is. Forget science fiction, forget time travel, we literally try every day to glimpse the future and to plan for it, because tefilla is all about the future. And so our sages teach us that we must give thanks for what has been, and we must pray for what will be.²⁰

I came across the following piece that was written by one of the sons of Rav Shimon Schwab, z”l, the previous leader of the German Jewish community located in Washington Heights, New York. He writes: “My father... left a daily diary spanning the last 43 years of his life. The most stunning revelation is that it is replete with tefillos [prayers] and tears, from cover to cover. He wrote out his prayers for himself, for his family, for his community, for Klal Yisroel [the Jewish people]. One can almost touch the tears that were poured there... a stream of heart-wrenching tefillos that he formulated at every juncture, at moments of difficulty, in his own life as well as others', pleading for G-d's mercy. This perhaps is the main function and chesed grandparents can perform for family, and for their offspring.

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"When do we start davening for our children? I found in his diary a piece of paper, which he had written when his first grandchild was about to be born, over 40 years ago. He asked: 'Hashem, please lighten for my daughter, Yehudis... the pain of pregnancy and [the] pain of childbirth... Let the child emerge into the light of the world without danger to the mother, without danger to the child, in a good and blessed moment, for Mazel Tov.'

"And he continued to chart, in his tefilla, the entire life course of the child.

"Let there be a live birth, for a long life, to worship You, sincerely and completely, in happiness. The child should serve You in good physical health, and good mental health for a long and peaceful life with good parnassah [a good livelihood] to support himself with dignity.'

"The whole life of the child was charted, before the child was ever even born. Tefilla is a tremendous source of strength of grandparents – nay, a duty and responsibility of grandparents – on behalf of their family."²¹

In a similar vein, Rav Shlomo Wolbe, z"l, who was one of the great rabbis of our generation and who passed away only a few years ago, writes: "On a personal note, I am convinced that if I have reached some level of Torah, it is in the merit of my mother's tefillos [prayers]. I took note that she would daven for me – up to ten times a day!

"We can never say we have davened enough for our children. It is impossible to define a limit to the amount of tefillos we need to daven for them. Furthermore, our sages did not compose a nusach – a text – for such tefillos. All we can do is daven from the depths of our hearts. And this is exactly what we have to do. We should express ourselves with our own personal words, each according to his needs at that particular time.

"Davening for our children is so important that it is possible that tefilla is the most important aspect of chinuch [education]. It would be an illusion to think that raising our children to be great Torah scholars with sterling character traits is in our own mortal hands.

"Everything depends upon Divine assistance. HaKadosh Baruch Hu – Hashem – gave us our children as a deposit to take care of for Him. We have responsibilities towards

our children. But ultimately, only with an outpouring of tefilla can we properly care for the deposit that [He] has given us."²²

There is a value to being in shul – together – even if we don't know how to daven from a siddur – it's still a mitzvah just to sit in the shul. And not knowing how to daven from a siddur does not excuse a person from calling out to Hashem for his needs.

Who doesn't want his child to have a good spouse; a good livelihood; good health; happiness; to be a good Jew; and so many other things?

We need to take the time now – today and every day – to reflect and to recognise what our children, and even their children, will need in the future and to daven to Hashem for these things.

Call out to Hashem. Speak from your heart. Sow the seeds that will ensure the future of your own family, of this community, and of the entire Jewish people – in order that, as was the case with Ya'akov Avinu, our children and our grandchildren will, years from now, come and reap the fruits of what we have sown.

¹Rashi on Shemos 25:8

²Shemos 25:8

³Rashi on Shemos 25:5, d.h. va'atzei shitim citing Midrash Tanchuma 9

⁴Ya'akov died in 2255. The exodus from Egypt took place in 2448. (See Artscroll Appendix Timeline 1 in the Stone Tanach; Seder HaDoros)

⁵Megilla 29a explaining Yechezkel 11:16

⁶Aruch HaShulchan 151:1

⁷Id.

⁸Shulchan Aruch 151:2

⁹Shulchan Aruch 151:1; Mishna Berurah 151:11

¹⁰Shulchan Aruch 151:1

¹¹Id.

¹²Tehillim 84:5

¹³Shulchan Aruch 90:9

¹⁴Mishna Berurah 90:28

¹⁵Mishlei 14:28

¹⁶Mishna Berurah 90:28

¹⁷Shulchan Aruch 90:9

¹⁸Mishna Berurah 90:33

¹⁹Shmuel 1 1:9

²⁰Shulchan Aruch 230:1

²¹http://www.pirchei.co.il/specd_ed/down/archives/grandparentspage.htm

²²Rigshei Lev: Women and Tefilla: Perspectives, Laws, and Customs by Menachem Nissel (pages 214-15) citing Rav Shlomo Wolbe's sefer: Zeri-chah u-vinyan ba-chinuch.

INVESTING IN A SPIRITUAL FUTURE

BY MOIRA SCHNEIDER

The historic Gardens Synagogue, home to the oldest congregation in the country, whose present edifice is a masterpiece of Edwardian architecture, has now been further enhanced by the addition of 24 stained glass windows.

The windows were researched and designed by plastic surgeon, Dr Winston Shaer, a member of the congregation, in memory of his wife Barbara, who suffered an untimely death three years ago. They were dedicated the day after her yahrzeit, in February this year.

The couple was married at the Gardens Shul in 1968, having gone out together for seven years beforehand. In 2007, Barbara was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer, three weeks after returning from a holiday in Phuket.

While the Shaers had been proud Jews, they had not been particularly involved in the community, Shaer told the Simchah television programme earlier this year. He has, however, attended shul morning and evening since his wife's passing, saying it has given him structure in his life and given him back something that he had lost.

"The community here surrounds you and loves you and supports you and helps you enormously. It's been an incredible eye-opener and an amazing experience for me to actually belong," he said of the integral role the shul now plays in his life.

Shaer explained his choice of medium in a brochure published to mark the occasion. "Stained glass windows represent a three-dimensional art form that projects its colourful image in all directions as light passes through it. These windows reflect Jewish religious values and traditions both into and across the synagogue and beyond."

Twelve paired, centrally-positioned windows illustrate the 12 major festivals, while the remaining four sets of three