



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Terumah

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Terumah

Are You Centered?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Are you centered?

If not, how do you find your center? And how do you help your children do the same?

The answer may be found in a perplexing and rather obscure miracle that took place while the Israelites were in the desert building the portable Tabernacle which would be the focus of God’s presence among them.

The blueprints called for a single solid bar to be inserted through the middle of all the planks that comprised the three walls of the Tabernacle, after the three walls were up.

How, pray tell, can one insert a solid bar through the middle of three walls and their inevitable corners?

Hence the miracle.

How relevant is this miracle for us today? What does this teach us about being centered, finding a center, and passing a center on to our loved ones?

In this core sermon you will find out. It is anchored and centered by a powerful story of a Chassidic Master analyzing yeshiva vs. university education with a compass and a circle.

ARE YOU CENTERED?

1. A Perfect Circle (Story)

In the 1960s, a young gentleman, preparing for a bright future ahead, came to see the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The young man asked the Rebbe if he should go to university to study. The Rebbe inquired whether the young man was asking for his advice or for his blessing. The young man said that he'd really like to go because he thought it would be good for his future, and was thus asking for a blessing.

The Rebbe replied with a smile: "A blessing is always more effective when it comes with advice. My advice is that you shouldn't go yet. Rather, you should stay in yeshiva and study the Divine wisdom of Torah."

Obstinate, persistent, and just a bit irreverent, as young adults are often wont to be, the fellow asked why the Rebbe thought college was not a good idea for him at this point?

The Rebbe handed the young man a pencil and asked him to draw a circle. The young man took the pencil and drew a circle. The Rebbe asked if the circle that he drew was a perfect circle. The young man said that no, of course it wasn't a perfect circle. In fact, no matter how many circles he drew, he could not possibly draw a perfectly circular and symmetrical circle.

The Rebbe asked what it would take to draw a perfect circle? The young man said that, if he had a compass, he could draw a perfectly round circle.

The Rebbe opened the drawer of his desk, removed a compass, and handed it to the young man, encouraging him to try again. The fellow did so, drawing a perfectly round and complete circle.

The Rebbe now asked: "Why is it that without a compass you cannot draw a perfect circle no matter how many times you try, but with the compass you could draw a perfect circle on the first try?"

The young man replied that when you firmly place the pointed arm of the compass in the center of your desired circle, then you can easily and simply drag the other arm holding the pencil around without wavering.

The Rebbe told the young man: “The goal of life is to create a perfect circle which encompasses all aspects of your life. But you cannot do that when you do not have a centering compass. All the knowledge you will ever acquire are like circles. But you need a solid center – your core purpose – to guide the knowledge to its proper end. Without a strong and unwavering center point around which to draw, you will end up with jagged circles, incomplete circles, many different unfinished circles, but not a complete circle”

The Rebbe continued: “It seems to me that you have not yet established a strong and secure center. My advice therefore is not to go drawing your circles in life until you first establish an unwavering core around which to draw.”

In relating this story, the young man, now a seasoned professor, concluded:

“I did not heed the Rebbe’s advice. Today, in my life, I have many unfinished circles, but none of them are complete. The Rebbe wisely understood back then what a young immature man like me did not.”

2. Centered and Secure

All parents want their children to be confident, centered and secure as they tackle the many challenges that dot the horizons of life.

The same is true for our personal selves: we all want and need a secure and unwavering core to keep us centered in the stormy seas and wild jungles of life.

No one dreams of having broken circles, jagged morals, lopsided principles, or malformed ideals. The key to achieving perfection is to have a point, a nucleus right in the middle – a mission statement – around which to anchor your life.

When you are centered in life, anything is possible. When you are not centered, everything is imperfect. Most healthy human beings would agree that building and discovering a solid core is vital. The obvious question is: How to do it?

3. Parshat Terumah

In this week's Torah reading, Parshat Terumah, God commands the Children of Israel to build a home for the Divine here upon this material earth. As He tells Moses:

“And they shall make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst.”¹

As the sages² learn from the pluralistic language of the verse – *I will dwell in their midst* (not *in it*, in the Sanctuary's midst), within each and every person – it is the calling and purpose of every single human to build a temple of the divine in his or her own personal life.

The Mishkan – the portable desert Tabernacle, which later became the Temple in Jerusalem – is the template for achieving this lofty goal: Crafting a spiritual presence from a material universe.

Our Torah reading describes the Mishkan in great detail, down to the fibers of its materials, the shapes of its beams, the intricacies of its vessels, and the order of its construction. The Torah is so very precise so as to teach us the specific steps for building each our personal tabernacles.

¹ Exodus 25:8.

² Reishis Chochma Shaar HaAhava ch. 6 (69b). Shaloh 32b. 326b. Alsheich on the verse.

4. Planks, Sockets and Bars

After enumerating and diagramming the planks that comprised the Mishkan's walls,³ the Torah describes the sockets and rings that should hold them in place.⁴ Then the Torah describes further measures for holding the planks together, stating that bars should be fashioned to run along the walls, looped through the rings (almost like a belt).

If that's not enough, the Torah lists one more measure to ensure that the planks of the northern, western, and southern walls (the eastern wall was a curtain) are aligned in place:

*And the middle bar in the midst of the planks shall [extend and] penetrate from one end to the other end.*⁵

What does this mean? Unlike the bars that looped through rings, which were on the outer face of the planks, at the top and bottom, the middle bar – called the *briach hatichon* – penetrated into the planks and ran all the way inside the three walls.

To help us visualize: a hole was bored through the middle of all the planks and a bar was threaded into the hole, continuing through the planks all the way around. This guaranteed that the planks would remain perfectly aligned, level, secure, and symmetrical.

5. A Far-Reaching Talmud

In commenting on this, the Talmud states something fascinating and initially perplexing:

By a miracle did it stand there.⁶

What was the miracle? The 11th century commentator, Rashi,⁷ explains:

³ Exodus 26:15-18.

⁴ Exodus 26:19-25.

⁵ Exodus 26:28.

⁶ Shabbat 98b.

⁷ See also Tosafot ad loc.

After the sockets were placed on the northern, western and southern walls, a middle bar was placed in the center of the walls and it continued through all the corners and directions. One cannot find a craftsman to implement this [today]. Thus a miracle occurred and the bar snaked around of its own volition.

The bar extended all the way through the planks of the three walls, after the three walls were already erected, and this bar curved miraculously through the corners, penetrating, as the verse clearly states, *from one end to the other end*.

How did a solid bar curve like a snake from end to end, in three directions through three walls? We don't know. This was the miracle.

Miracles do not happen without a reason. The Tabernacle could have been designed differently without the need for this miracle. For example, three different center bars could have been used. Why the need for one continuous central bar?

In short, why did God design the Mishkan in such a way that it would require a miracle?

And what is the meaning of this miracle and what lessons can it teach us in our lives today?

6. The Common Core

The sages and mystics teach⁸ that the structure of the Mishkan reflects the structure of existence. Everyone, from the greatest saint to the greatest sinner, from the biggest believer to the biggest cynic, knows that existence is extremely diverse, that there are countless creatures, creations, details and minutia. One human body alone contains over 75 trillion cells and a multitude of components and systems.

⁸See Rabbein Bechayei (29:9) and Shaloh (324b) on our Parsha. Sefer Torat HaOleh from the Ramo. See also Tikkunei Zohar 13a. Mamarie Admur Haemtzo, I, Vayeira, p. 156. Ohr HaTorah, Terumah, p. 3048, Devarim, p. 37. Torat Shmuel, 5640, Chukat p. 229; et al.

What keeps it all together? What unifying force coordinates them all and maintains their harmony and symmetry? What stabilizing factor runs through all the parts of existence to keep them all working in unison?

The mystics teach that it is the cosmic energy of the *briach hatichon*, the middle bar that runs through it all, binding all the planks together, so to speak.

In the words of the verse, *it penetrates from one end to the other end* – from one extreme to the other, through and through the entire cosmic structure, from the highest of the high to the lowest of the low.

There is a core rod, a central bar that binds it all together. A unified singularity that runs through all of existence.

Because the Tabernacle/Temple is a reflection of the Divine and the divine structure of the universe,⁹ it was constructed in such a way that one center penetrated all of its parameters – curving this way and that, even if it took a miracle, so that all of the structure – not part, ALL – would be stabilized and centered by the same bar.

7. Personal Lesson

Very nice. But the questions remains: Why couldn't God have done it differently? Why not first place the central bar in a U shape, and then slide on the planks and anchor them after? Why first anchor the planks necessitating a miracle to thread one solid bar through all three walls and their corners?

Perhaps we may say that God wanted to teach us how to find that ever-elusive core center bar to anchor us in our lives.

⁹This is why to build the Mishkan the Ten Sefirot, from Chochma through Malchut, were required, reflecting the Ten Utterances and Sefirot by which God created the world.

Some of us are taught to recognize the core and draw the perfect circle from day one. Some of us grow up in nice, healthy, loving homes where the divine teachings, sublime principles and core values are ingrained and taught every day, every week, every Shabbat, every holiday, every everything.

But, in our dark world, even those lucky to have such strong and unwavering centers from day one still need constant reminders and reinforcements to maintain our balance in an ever increasingly distracting world.

And then there are others – and today the “others” are sadly a growing majority of people – who have not been taught about a center, who have not been gifted with a core, an anchor and unwavering middle point from which to draw and build complete and healthy circles? Many of us today have grown up in chaotic and anxiety-ridden homes, not to mention broken and abusive families. Dysfunctional environments where our security and self-esteem was not nurtured; where we were not given the opportunity to develop a strong foundational nucleus. Where is this growing population supposed to find their core? How are they to know that a core center even exists?

To this says God: *Make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst.* You don't have to build the core center, the middle rod, on your own. All you have to do is begin building a holy structure, plank by plank, connecting the planks with sockets and rings. And then you need to do nothing more. God only asks that you leave a hole, an empty space – the space of humility – in the middle of your planks, and He promises to miraculously fill that space with *the middle bar in the midst of the planks, which shall penetrate from one end to the other end.*

All you have to do is do good, live divinely, start to make a home for God here on earth – fashion one plank, it could be one small mitzvah, then another connecting plank – all the while leaving a humble space, for the central middle bar to unobtrusively pierce through it all. Then, even if it takes a miracle, God will snake that core bar into every corner of your life, binding every seemingly disparate detail into one unified whole – a tabernacle that will be your unwavering core.

When we build our lives, when we build our personal tabernacles, sanctuaries and temples, it is imperative that we create space at their center for an unwavering and miraculous core. We create the space through our humble commitment to the Divine mission we were charged with. Dedicating our lives to fulfilling our purpose – building a Divine home in our corner of the world.

The easiest way to do this is for parents and teachers to educate children about this core idea from day one.

If for whatever reason we did not grow up with this message, we can always begin building our temple, and the core will emerge as God promised.

8. Our Children, Our Sanctuaries (Conclusion)

Our most pure and innocent temples are our children. It is essential that we instill in them a center rod, a middle bar that permeates their cores without doubt. Our children must know that in their centers, in the centers of the walls of their temples, there is one overriding mission – one unifying undercurrent – that extends and pierces every single aspect of life, from one end to the other, and that core connector will never break.

If our parents instilled this in us, it is much easier for us to instill in our children. If our parents didn't, then we have two choices: either 1) we could bemoan this fact, and do to our kids what our parents did to us, perpetuating the vicious cycle; or 2) we could follow what the Jews did in this week's Torah reading – we could build up our most precious temple, our children, showing them how they are a divine sanctuary, a home for God, and then God will miraculously weave the middle bar through and through, from one end of our lives to the other.

When we each do our individual part, building our individual sanctuaries and embracing our personal cores, all these efforts will surely accumulate and reach the ultimate goal – the revelation of the cosmic core of all of existence. A time when the divine seamlessly flow through all the arteries and veins of existence.

It will be like a global middle bar piercing and penetrating all of existence and binding it together into one unified Temple with the coming of the Redemption.

May it happen speedily in our days and in our midst.

Shabbat Shalom!

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