

Yachin and Boaz: The Pillars of our Faith

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Open for Me an entrance like the point of a needle, and I will open for you an entrance like that of the Beit haMikdash.

Popular variation on Midrash, Shir haShirim Rabbah 5:2

פתחו לי פתח כחודה של מחט ואני אפתח
לכם פתח כפתחו של אולם
מדרש שיר השירים רבה ה:ב

Our pre-Tishah b'Av curriculum tends to outline themes of mourning and destruction, reviewing the evil wrought by ancient armies as well as the sins which rendered our ancestors vulnerable to their aggression and the Beit haMikdash vulnerable to Divine abandonment. This emphasis is natural, but our efforts during this period ought also to be directed toward studying the Beit haMikdash itself, as a step toward memorializing and rebuilding what we once had.

One reason to learn about the Beit haMikdash is to perpetuate its memory:

How do we know that we are supposed to memorialize the Beit haMikdash? Rabbi Yochanan explained: It is written (Yirmiyah 30:17), 'For I will restore health to you, and from your wounds I will heal you; this is the word of Gd. They called you an outcast, saying, 'She is Zion; none seek her.' It says, 'None seek her,' from which we learn that she requires seeking.

Talmud, Succah 41a

מנא לן דעבדינן זכר למקדש
אמר רבי יוחנן דאמר קרא כי
אעלה ארכה לך וממכותיך
ארפאך נאם ה' כי נדחה קראו
לך ציון היא דרש אין לה דרש
אין לה מכלל דבעיא דרישה
סוכה מא.

This passage teaches that we are to memorialize the Beit haMikdash as a step toward seeking its return – and surely the act of study is a suitable memorial.

A second reason for study of the Beit haMikdash emerges from a midrash on Yechezkel's vision for the third Beit haMikdash:

Shemuel said: 'And if they are ashamed of all that they have done, [impart to them the form of the house, its structure...]' – Has that form of the house ever existed, even until now? Rather, HaShem said: Since you involve yourself therein, it is as though you had built it.

Midrash, Vayikra Rabbah 7:3

שמואל אמר (יחזקאל מג) ואם נכלמו
מכל אשר עשו וכי יש צורת הבית עד
עכשיו אלא אמר הקב"ה הואיל ואתם
מתעסקים בו כאלו אתם בונים אותו
מדרש ויקרא רבה ז:ג

This midrash instructs us to learn about the Beit haMikdash because studying its form and structure is, in some sense, akin to constructing it ourselves. This, too, is a reason to study about the Beit haMikdash in the period leading up to Tishah b'Av.

In order to fulfill both of these imperatives, and to learn an important lesson regarding the route out of our current exile, I propose to look at a particular element of the Beit haMikdash: The two pillars, Yachin and Boaz.

Naming the pillars?

And he erected the pillars for the hall of the sanctuary, and he erected the right-hand pillar and called it 'Yachin', and he erected the left-hand pillar and called it 'Boaz'.

Melachim I 7:21

ויקם את העמדים לאלם ההיכל ויקם את העמוד
הימני ויקרא את שמו יכין ויקם את העמוד
השמאלי ויקרא את שמו בעז:
מלכים א ז: כא

The above-cited passage, coming as it does in the middle of an arid list of relatively minor elements in the construction of the First Beit haMikdash, is easily overlooked – but it ought to raise our eyebrows. What was the purpose of naming these copper pillars?²⁰ Certainly, other elements of the Beit haMikdash also carried names; the gates, for example, bore titles that described their roles. But the titles Yachin and Boaz, with their themes of Establishment and Strength, seem to describe vision rather than function, leaving us to wonder what sort of vision might be imparted by structural supports which were not of the key klei kodesh, holy vessels, prescribed by the Torah.

Radak explained that these portals were named in order to provide a positive message for those who passed between them:

*He named the pillars to create a positive omen. They were at the entrance to the Temple, and he called them by names to create a positive omen. He called one 'Yachin', an expression of establishment, that the Temple should be established forever, like the phrase, 'Like the moon, it should be established forever.' 'Boaz' is an expression of strength, a contraction of 'Bo Oz [strength within]', meaning that God should place in it strength and endurance, as it is written, 'HaShem will give His nation strength.'*²¹

Radak, Melachim I 7:21

מה שקרא שם לעמודים לסימן טוב
לפי שהיו בכניסת הבית קרא להם
שמות לסימן טוב לאחד יכין לשון
הכנה שיכון הבית לעולם כמו
שאמר כירח יכון עולם ובועז לשון
עוז והיא מלה מורכב' בו עז כלומר
שיתן הקל בו עוז וקיום כמו
שנאמר ה' עוז לעמו:
רד"ק שם

But Radak's message is hard to understand; why did these particular structural elements warrant names? We have no record of names for the vessels handled by the Kohanim, or the bricks and beams that supported this structure. What is the unique character of entrance pillars?

The Role of the Portal

We might begin to comprehend the significance of Yachin and Boaz by examining the broader biblical role of entrances, as well as the doorposts which frame them.

²⁰ It is worth noting that Shir haShirim 3:9-10 seems to describe these pillars as silver. Midrash Rabbah Naso 12 addresses this problem in several ways, including suggesting that the pillars were of copper that was refined like silver. On the other hand, Bava Batra 14a identifies the pillars of Shir haShirim as referring to posts inside the Aron Kodesh, not the pillars at the entrance to the Beit haMikdash.

²¹ For additional explanations of the names for these pillars, see Ralbag and Malbim to Melachim I 7:21 and Yalkut Shimoni Melachim I 185.

The best-known doorposts of the Jewish people were those of our homes in Mitzrayim. These were the sites on which our ancestors placed the blood of their korban pesach, marking the transition from an external world of Egyptian idolatry and slavery to an inner space dedicated to recognizing the reign of HaShem and to fulfilling His mitzvot.²²

The trend established by those doorposts remains to this day, with our mezuzah ensuring that we remember our loyalty to HaShem as we cross our thresholds. Thus the Sefer haChinuch writes regarding mezuzah:

Among the roots of this mitzvah is to act as a reminder of faith on HaShem whenever a person enters or exits the home.

Sefer haChinuch, Mitzvah 423

משרשי המצוה להיות זכרון לאדם באמונת השם
בכל עת בואו לביתו וצאתו
ספר החינוך מצוה תכג

This concept of sacred transition at a portal is not limited to Jewish homes, though; this is a broad biblical theme, joining jambs separated by centuries. Whether the inaccessible gate to Gan Eden (Bereishit 3:24) or the metaphorical entrance of opportunity to sin (Bereishit 4:7), whether the gopherwood gangplank of Noach's sheltering ark (Bereishit 6:16) or the clandestine entry to Lot's angel-protected home in Sdom (Bereishit 19:6) or the Heavenly gates of Yaakov's dream (Bereishit 28:17), the doorway is a pivot between worlds, a point from which one may travel in different, and sometimes even diametrically opposite, directions.

Nowhere is this truer than the entrance to the Mishkan, and later the Beit haMikdash. To this portal Aharon and his sons were brought to be consecrated for their service. (Shemot 29:11) To this portal the Jews would deliver their korbanot, offering their gifts to HaShem. To this portal Jewish women gathered to learn the word of HaShem.²³ To this portal Moshe came to receive Divine instruction. (Bamidbar 22:5)

A Jew who stood on one side of this last portal in a state of impurity violated no law, but if he stepped mere inches across the threshold he was liable for serious punishment. On one side of this boundary, a korban was to be brought upon an altar for HaShem; on the other side, civilization butchered animals and consumed them for personal satisfaction. Portions of certain korbanot were required to remain within the hall, and the uniform of the kohanim could not be worn outside. Outside, one could stand or sit or recline, spit or sleep or eat; inside, one was required to stand, and to comport one's self as one in the presence of the King of Kings. The outer space was the realm of human-focused activity; the inner space was dedicated to communion with HaShem. In between stood the portal, and its associated pair of pillars.²⁴

The names Yachin and Boaz

The limbs of this sacred portal, two gargantuan copper pillars, were dubbed Yachin and Boaz, and we now perceive that those names were not mere nicknames for familiar elements of a national monument. As we suspected and as Radak hinted, those names did indeed convey a vision, a promise offered to all who would transit within.

²² See Kiddushin 22b, Shmot Rabbah 16:2 and Rashi to Shmot 12:13

²³ Ibn Ezra to Shemot 38:8

²⁴ See also Zohar to Parshat Emor, page 90b, for more on the great power of this portal.

These twin pillars flanked the point at which a Jew transitioned from the mundane to the sacred, from a world of tumah to a world of taharah, from a world of consumption to a world of korban. Via their names, those pillars informed every individual who passed between them, “We are invested with Divine strength, and we will be established forever. There will never come a time when entering this Sanctuary will fail to transport you into another realm, and there will never come a time when this portal will cease to be available to any and all.”

Yachin and Boaz, Fallen and Rebuilt

As Tishah b'Av reminds us, the literal promise of Yachin and Boaz was not fulfilled; the physical portal vanished nearly two thousand years ago. Amos made prophetic reference to this in his vision of the destruction of the first Beit haMikdash, describing HaShem decreeing for the angels to strike the keystone²⁵ and so undermine the arch at the entrance to the building. We are taught²⁶ that the pillars were destroyed, their copper taken to Babylon.

Nonetheless, we know that the commitment of Yachin and Boaz remains firm at the thresholds of the synagogues and study halls that are our poor substitute for the Beit haMikdash. Yechezkel's pledge²⁷ of a mikdash me'at, a mini-Sanctuary, guarantees that a Jew will still be able to transition from the mundane to the sacred, when entering the space of tefillah and talmud Torah. The pillars yet stand.

During this period of bein hametzarim, when we mourn the loss of the Beit haMikdash and increase our longing for its rebuilding, we are inspired to re-double our efforts to retrieve the authentic portal. May our study of the elements of the Beit haMikdash bring about their speedy return.

²⁵ Ibn Ezra to Amos 9:1

²⁶ Melachim II 25:13

²⁷ Yechezkel 11:16