To Plant. To Believe. To Carry On

by

Rabbi Eliyahu Safran

There is a story in the Talmud of an old man planting a carob tree as a younger man strolled by. “Old man,” said the younger man, “what are you doing? Do you really expect to live long enough to enjoy the fruits of your labor?”

The older man wiped the sweat off his brow and then shook his head. “I was born into a world flourishing with ready pleasures. My ancestors planted for me, and so now I plant for my children and theirs after them...”

*And they shall make an ark of acacia wood* (atzei shitim), two and a half cubits is length, a cubit and a half its width, and a cubit and a half its height.  (Shemot 25:10)

And not only the ark, the Aron! Let us not forget that *atzei shitim* would be needed for the *Shulchan* (the Golden Table) as well. Not to mention the construction of the mizbayach ha’nechoshes (the Copper Altar) and the mizbayach ha’zahav (the Golden Altar), used for incense offerings.  And the planks around the *Mishkan* (“…and you shall make planks for the Mishkan of atzei shitim, omdim, standing upright.”) A veritable *forest* of acacia wood would be needed for the sacred task of constructing the *Mishkan*, where God promised that He would “…reside in their midst”. This was no simple “handyman’s” project, no IKEA project in a box! This was major construction. This was the *Mishkan*, precursor of the *Beit Ha’Mikdash*.

There was no question that the Children of Israel were up to the task. There was only one concern. Given that they were in the middle of the desert (and for those who have visited the Sinai Desert, it is not merely a desert, it is a veritable moonscape!) exactly where is one to presume the People found the wood for this project?

Ever rational, Ibn Ezra concluded that there simply had to have been wood nearby, noting that, “…adjacent to Mt. Sinai, there was a grove of acacia trees.” Others struggled to fathom where this essential component of the *Mishkan* was to be found!

Naturally, acacia trees were not the only component needed to construct a dwelling appropriate to house God. Such a dwelling demanded gold, silver, copper, dyed fabrics, and animal hides. But these were easily obtained from of the spoils the Jews took with them when they left Mitzrayim. God had promised their forefathers that when God redeemed them they would leave birechush gadol – with great wealth – so these materials they had in abundance. But the acacia trees?

Rashi cites Chazal in providing us with answer, Yaakov Avinu brought the trees with him when he came down to Egypt from the Land of Israel! Imagine! Yaakov Avinu came down to Egypt *already* anticipating what the generations hence would need! Chazal tells us that he told his sons, “My children, in the future you will be redeemed from this land and God will command you to build the *Mishkan*. Plant trees now,” he implored them, “so that when God will instruct you to build it, the trees will be ready.”

This is, of course, a lovely explanation that satisfies in many ways. But a rationalist like Ibn Ezra might wonder, why couldn’t they simply buy the trees from the locals when the need arose? Why the bother of schlepping trees all the way from Canaan to Mitzrayim? Surely that was excessive and unnecessary. There *had to have been* a better way! Yet, we know that if that’s what Yaakov Avinu did, there *must* have been a reason; there must have been a lesson that was greater than the simply acquisition of wood. Indeed, there was such a lesson and the lesson is at once simple and foundational. It is emotional and practical, and it teaches, at its base, hope and optimism; it is a lesson that teaches when things seem darkest there is a new dawn approaching.

Yaakov knew that acacia trees could be always be found at the local lumber yard, as it were. But he wanted there to be more than just wood from the trees. He wanted his children – crying out in their misery – to be able to raise their heads every so often and see trees, magnificent trees that he had been brought for them, trees that would not only root them in their history but allow them to see in their soaring limbs a better, brighter tomorrow; trees that would remind them of their dear *zayde*, *Zayde Yaakov* who loved them and believed in them. Seeing those trees would remind them that they were worthy, that a new dawn would break for them.

Yaakov did not bring those trees simply to bolster the spirits of his children and their children. As vital a reason as that was, he knew that there was a *practical* reason that there had to be acacia trees – there was a *Mishkan* to be built! Such a sacred task could not rely on trees simply “popping up”, or being around, or even miraculously appearing. When it came time to build the *Mishkan* the trees had to be there, and they had to be there because of him.

And they were. Why? Because he had planned ahead! Yaakov, like so many *zaydes* before and after him, was thinking of his grandchildren and his great-grandchildren long before they existed. He wanted his grandchildren to continue the tradition but if he did not do his part… how could there have been a tradition for them to continue? He had a responsibility to them if they were to be part of the tradition he loved.

Yaakov, with a *zayde’s* insight, anticipated the needs of his future great-grandchildren even as he was connecting to them. “I am thinking of you,” he was saying to them. “I am worried for you. I want to be sure you have what you need physically and spiritually…”

Just as a tree with the strongest roots is sure to have the tallest and strongest limbs, the people rooted most deeply with its past and traditions will have the greatest hope for a strong and healthy future.

 “And you shall make the planks (kerashim) for the Mishkan of acacia wood, upright (omdim)...”

Of course, the wood had to be placed upright. How else could it have been placed? What is the Torah teaching us with this seemingly unnecessary detail? Rabbi Soloveitchik explains an important *halachic* principle derived from this command and it is not simply that the lumber must be upright. “This verse is utilized to teach the rule that the planks for the *Mishkan* must be cut from the acacia tree parallel to the direction of the tree’s original growth and laid so the lower part of the board corresponds to the lower part of the original tree (derech gidulo). If the board were to be turned upside down, with the upper part of the tree corresponding to the lower part of the board, it would be invalid for building the *Mishkan*.” Rabbi Soloveitchik goes on to teach that consequent to this rule, the Talmud (in Sukkah 45b) makes clear that all *mitzvos* which are based on plant life, such as lulav, hadasim, aravos, must be likewise arrayed. They all must be fulfilled derech gidulam, they all must be held as in their original growth orientation. He goes on to explain that *derech gidulo* is more than just a condition for proper observance of the mitzvah; if *derech gidulo* is lacking, the object itself is invalid.

Perhaps this too was reason enough for Yaakov to bring the trees with him, and not leave it for his children to somehow happen upon the trees. It was important for them to see *how the trees grew* so that they could see how they too should grow – *derech gidulo*. With feet firmly rooted and head held high. Heads, hearts, intellect in a line. Physical, emotional, spiritual aligned perfectly. If they are not, our worlds are topsy-turvy and our lives without meaning.

A closer reading of Sukkah 45b suggests two additional interpretations to the standing acacia planks. In our original interpretation, *omdim* means as we’ve suggested, as they naturally grow. The first new interpretation relies on a later verse to deepen our understanding, “and you shall overlay the planks with gold”. Here we are taught that we are not to create a gold piece as large as the entire plank, but rather large enough only to embellish it with gold décor. In other words, it is the planks are the matrix for the gold; the wood supports the gold. It is the acacia that is *omdim*, not the gold.

We confuse the relative value of the wood and the gold if we do not appreciate the power of this interpretation. The gold is meaningless without the strength of the wood to hold it.

The third interpretation speaks to what will become of these planks when the *Mishkan* no longer stands, when it is replaced by the Beit ha’Mikdash. The Talmud, in Sotah, teaches that when the Temple was built the *Mishkan* and all its furnishings was buried alongside the Heichal. It will never be lost. It will stand, remain *omdim*, for all time.

Far from standing in opposition with one another, these three interpretations complement one another. They each speak to how we continue tradition and carry on the heritage of our forefathers. First and foremost, we must continue our growth and development in a natural way – *derech gidulo* – never presume to do it “better”, never turning the planks away from their original and proper direction. It won’t work. It shouldn’t work. Second, beware of “over embellishment.” Few generations have the toys, the technology or the wherewithal to over-embellish like this one, but we must remember – it is the tree that is important. The gilding is secondary. And finally, the greatest lesson of all – if your temple is built, the *Mishkan* is never abandoned, never forgotten, never betrayed.

*Atzei shitim omdim*! The planks shall stand. And as they stand, so do we.