

Repeating the Tabernacle

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

One is bound to wonder why the Torah spends so many chapters describing the Tabernacle, its design, the instructions to the craftsmen how to build the parts. And then how fit the parts together and the way it was executed. Finally how it was dedicated. What lessons can one possibly learn from what looks like a combination of an architect's detailed conception and a builder's execution? Is this where the Jewish fondness for Real Estate comes from?

Of course this detail and repetition all goes to emphasize how important in so many respects the Tabernacle was. Both as a community project and as a symbol of the presence of God within the community. It was also a center of community activity as well as having its spiritual role at the very center of their world. All Mesopotamian royal palaces that have been discovered, combine the domain of the king, with that of the court, the law and the temple. This structure had to serve all of these functions. There's some ambiguity as to where the tent of Moses was. So that this had to compete so to speak or at least rival the centers of other cultures at the time.

Another reason for focusing on detail is that first you need a design. Then builders to execute it. And finally see if the finished work functions as it is supposed to. That is precisely what happens here. In reality, anyone who has had builders in knows things never gets done exactly the way you wanted it.

And it is also true that in most construction projects materials go missing or suppliers take off their cut and there are lots of sticky fingers. So you might say that the preoccupation with detail is evidence of how seriously they took the project, how important it was for the morale of the people and how eager they were to show that absolutely everything was accounted for. It was an act of worship and dedication rather than vanity and profit.

The lesson I take is that if they were so preoccupied with being absolutely honest, above board and responsible for a public project, how much more should we put effort, care and design into how we treat living human beings who matter more to God than any building however holy.

Our reading this week includes the well-known phrase "Tell the Children of Israel to take donations from everyone according to his wish." This refers to the donations required to build the Tabernacle. A wit commented on the use of "to take donations" instead of "giving donations." He said that in his experience a person may publicly like to tell everyone how much he is willing to give and make a fuss but when it comes to actually collecting the funds it's often a struggle. That's why you need to 'take' them!