

## Rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple

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This Shabbat's Torah portion, like those of the last three weeks, provides details of the construction of the Tabernacle, the portable Temple for the Children of Israel during their forty years of desert wanderings. Scholars tell us that these sections actually describe the ancient Jerusalem Temple, cast backwards in history to the Exodus to enhance the legitimacy of King Solomon's colossal construction project.

We might well ask why we should continue to read this section of the Torah, which doesn't seem to apply to us or to our modern times. Why should we care, for example, about the gold rings on the corners of the Ark of the Covenant, into which gilded wooden poles were to be inserted, so that nobody need touch the Ark in order to transport it from one encampment to the next?

Well, there is a good answer to that specific question and to many others about this otherwise arcane section of Torah. Torah commands that those poles never be removed from the Ark's golden rings. In other words, the Ark always had to be prepared for transport. The message ought not be lost on us, even thousands of years later: When Jewish life becomes untenable in any particular place, or even if we simply decide to move, we should be prepared to pick up the Torah, literally or figuratively, carrying our faith and our religious action with us.

No, we don't read these sections because we need to know the exact dimensions of the incense altar. Instead, we are heirs to a tradition that has much to teach us, wherever we go, in every age. With these portions, as with many others, we have to look past the details to find the deeper message.

Some of our coreligionists, though, read these Torah portions precisely so that they will know the exact specifications to create implements for sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple. An organization, The Temple Institute, easily found on the Internet, has gained increasing notice in recent years. Its web site boasts photographs of utensils that the Institute has created, to be ready for the rebuilt Temple. Not long ago, the Institute received some press, as it successfully raised \$90,000 toward its efforts.

The Temple Institute reminds us that about a third of the 613 commandments of traditional Judaism are to be performed only in the Jerusalem Temple. Therefore, even the most orthodox of modern Jews practices at most two-thirds of those 613 *mitzvot*. The Institute suggests that Judaism today is diminished as a result.

The Institute is unclear about when it hopes to commence construction on the Temple Mount, though it does say that it hopes to do so “in our lifetime.” Orthodox Jews pray that God will send a Messiah. Rebuilding the Temple and recommencing its sacrifices are included in traditional messianic hope and expectation. I’m not sure, though, whether The Temple Institute plans on waiting for God and the Messiah, or whether it aims to start the building itself.

A century ago, as modern Zionism began to grow, the overwhelming majority of Orthodox Jews and their rabbis opposed any movement to return Jewish sovereignty to the Land of Israel. They contended that the return to Zion was meant to take place only at Divine initiative, under the leadership of the Messiah.

The revered Rav Kook took a different position. He argued that Jews might return to the Promised Land, and even establish a state, as a first step toward our people’s ultimate redemption. Rav Kook’s suggestion was a decidedly minority opinion in the Orthodox world until the Holocaust.

Not much of a logical leap is required to imagine that some will think that casting sacred lavers and basins, drawing up blueprints, and even embarking upon a building campaign may similarly be considered to be steps that modern Jews may take toward messianic deliverance. If we can establish a Jewish State before God sends a Messiah to fulfill our salvation, why not begin construction before the Divinely-appointed redeemer arrives to complete construction?

This kind of thinking is dangerous. The sacred mound, where the ancient Temple stood, is not an empty plot of land today. When we picture “Jerusalem of Gold,” we envision a majestic golden dome. That dome and its neighboring mosque are of tremendously sacred significance to Muslims.

For some Jews, the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque constitute a terrible desecration. For others of us, those structures enhance the sanctity of the holy city. Jerusalem is birthplace not only of one but of three great world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. During the years between 1949 and

1967, when Jordan occupied the Old City of Jerusalem, our own holiest site, the Western Wall of the Temple Mount, was desecrated. By contrast, since 1967, Israel has vouchsafed the sanctity of the Muslim holy places on the Temple Mount, even to the point of outlawing Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount out of deference to the Muslim shrines. Respecting other faiths and their holy places is one way that the Israel fulfills the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

But what if God did send a messianic redeemer? Not only Orthodox Jews, but our Conservative brothers and sisters pray that God's Messiah will herald the reestablishment of sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple. We do not.

Our Reform founders were as anti-Zionist as the Orthodox, if for a completely different reason. They believed that they had found the Promised Land in modern Western Europe and in America. Reform Judaism embraced Zionism in the late 1930s. The Holocaust put to rest any thought that ultimate redemption had been found in the modern world.

In those earliest, anti-Zionist days, all prayers expressing a hope for a return to Zion were eliminated, including of course any reference to a rebuilt Temple or reestablishment of sacrifices. Later Reform prayer books would extol our people's return to Zion. To this day, we do not ask that the Jewish people in its entirety be gathered to the State of Israel, and we certainly do not ask for a resumption of sacrifices.

2,000 years ago, our rabbis were faced with a daunting challenge. Up until that point, the God of Israel had been worshiped in only one way: through sacrifices offered in the Temple. Now, with the Temple destroyed, the rabbis had two choices. The worship of the one God of Israel could cease, as was typically the case in the ancient world, whenever a people was conquered and its Temple laid waste. Alternatively, the rabbis could figuratively pick up the Ark by the poles, and carry it into a new reality. We may be thankful that the sages chose the latter route. Now, instead of burning the fat of animals and grain mixed with incense, we would render to God the offerings of our lips. Now, instead of serving God exclusively in the Temple, we would serve God through study and observance of Torah, wherever we might be.

Thanks to the wisdom of the rabbis, Judaism has thrived for two millennia, even in our people's darkest hours.

Let us proclaim: The religion established by the rabbis – a system of *mitzvot*, of good deeds and ritual service to God – was not second best. Temple sacrifices might have been the right and proper way to serve God in their day; but even then, our prophets proclaimed that slaughtered bullocks couldn't make up for unethical living. Sacrifices are not now and never will again be the most authentically Jewish way of serving God. Instead of attempting to breed a perfect red heifer, to be sacrificed and burned, its ashes mixed with water for a purification ritual, let us purify our actions, our hearts, and our words. Instead of seeking to rebuild one Temple in Jerusalem, let us serve God in our synagogues and in our homes – in Jerusalem, in Little Rock, and in every place the Jew wanders. Instead of planning to supplant the holy shrines of a sister faith, let us seek to live at peace with all the peoples of the Earth. Instead of looking into the Torah to find the measurements by which to build one altar for sacrifices and another for incense, let us look into that same Torah to learn how we can serve God in the way we live our lives.

Then, the Temple be rebuilt in the only way that matters: in our hearts and in our souls, in our synagogues and in our communities. Then, we may be God's partners in bringing the world to true redemption.

Amen.