

Pekudei: Art and Heart

- Nisson Shulman.

The MISHKAN was an example of art and heart blended together. Thus Solomon's name was SHLOMO, standing for SHLEMUS. One without the other is incomplete, and can even be cruel. Thus, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, unimpressed by the art of Rome after he saw the huddled poverty stricken people at the feet of the masterpieces. Russian noblewoman at play, and frozen coachman. Only heart and art together can create shlemut.

PEKUDEI: ART AND HEART

We have reached the final Sidra of Exodus. The Tabernacle was finally finished according to God's command. When we examine the previous chapters about the Tabernacle we find that the specifications for the Tabernacle and its holy vessels fall into two categories: content and beauty.

It was the highest expression of art. The finest and best materials, and the best workmanship were used. And to give it a Torah true content, warmth was needed; a feeling that came from the heart. The Tabernacle had to be a place that would warm the heart of man with love of God and humanity. So again and again we read the phrase, NEDIV LEV, "a willing heart", and particularly in connection with those who contributed to the building of the sanctuary. And about the architects, designers and builders who actually did the work, we read a similar phrase, CHACHAM LEV, "wise of heart".

Art and heart were therefore the two major qualities which blended to make the Tent of Meeting where man was brought closer to his neighbour and to his Creator.

This was new and revolutionary. For centuries after the world could not grasp it. The Talmud tells about Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, that when he visited Rome, then the capital of the world, he was deeply impressed with its majestic splendour. Beautiful statues adorned the squares and the parks of the metropolis. Masterpieces of art were covered with expensive drapes to protect them against the elements. Rabbi Joshua was much moved, and greatly inspired with this display of art and beauty. But then he saw men and women in rags, starving and freezing at the very feet of the statues bedecked with luxurious cloth, very similar to what you might still see today in any large metropolis, and Rabbi Joshua shuddered. The tragic gap between art and heart revealed itself to the sage in all its brutality and depravity. Consider! Art adorned to the point of deification, and human beings scandalously neglected and crushed!

What a gulf exists between the exterior beauty and the inner inhumanity of that kind of a civilization! Art so glorified and hearts so mercilessly torn from the bodies of men! A famous Russian novelist described the noblewoman who saw a play and was moved to tears by the anguish of the heroine in the play, and weeping she left the theatre, her heart melted with sympathy for the tragic fate of the heroine, only to find her coachman frozen to death in the Moscow cold on the open top of her carriage. "How aggravating", she said. "Wherever shall I find another coachman at this hour of the night?"

The Pesikta declares that the Hebrew name for King Solomon was Shlomo because Shalom means complete. By building the Temple in Jerusalem, Solomon completed the work of creation and was privileged to bear a name similar to one of the names by which God Himself is known (Pesikta Rabbati 6; Yalkut Kings I:186).

Here we have the Jewish point of view clearly stated. A world that cares only for material things and emphasizes externals, even if they are beauty and art - that ignores the other basic ingredient of the good life, the heart, is not an olam shalem, a complete and enduring world.

Only the harmonious blending of art and heart in the affairs of men will complete the work of Hashem's creation, take us out of chaos, and bring us to the blessed shores of security and peace.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)