



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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“Three Dimensions”

Since my childhood, I have been an avid reader. When I first discovered the joy of reading, I read everything I could get my hands on. Even today, my taste in reading is very eclectic. However, there is at least one genre of literature that I seem to avoid.

I do not read science fiction. I trace my distaste for science fiction to one of its common themes: the possible existence of a fourth dimension. Somehow, the three dimensions of our ordinary reality are quite enough for me. The possibility of a mysterious fourth, of a “black hole” in the universe, is one that I have always dismissed as unimaginable.

The three dimensions of our existence are not only part of our physical reality. Forward and backward, horizontal left and right, and vertical up and down all play a part in our religious experience as well.

For example, when the Jew shakes the *lulav* on Sukkot, he moves it from left to right, up and down, and forwards and backwards. In doing this, he mimics the ritual in the ancient holy Temple of *tenufah*, waving, where various sacred objects were lifted and rotated in all of the three dimensions.

When the *Shema* is recited and the Jew declares that the Lord is one, *echad*, he is instructed to imagine that God’s dominion is over all the three dimensions of existence. He rules the horizontal plane, the vertical plane, and the dimension of inner/outer.

Our tradition knows too of an entirely different dimensional triad. Not merely three aspects of space, but three modes of human experience: time, space, and person. In Hebrew, this triad is known as *olam-shana-nefesh*; literally “world-year-soul.”

Part of our experience is temporal; we live in time. We also live spatially, bound by geographical parameters. And we have the inner experience of being, of consciousness, of personal awareness. Thus, three dimensions.

These three dimensions play a central role in this week’s Torah portion, *Vayakhel*. Three themes are intertwined in the chapters of *Exodus* 35:1-38:20 which comprise our *parsha*.

These three themes are the Sabbath, the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), and the individuals to whom the words of this *parsha* are addressed and who contribute, both materially and creatively, to the construction of the *Mishkan*.

The portion begins as Moses assembles the entire congregation of the Children of Israel.

May the Torah learned
in this Torah Tidbits be לעילוי נשמת

נפתלי צבי בן
שמואל נטע והדס ז"ל
נלב"ע כ"ג אדר ב'

In loving memory of
Harry Naftali Manheim z"l
on his 12th yahrtzeit
23 Adar II, 5786

Moses and all the Jewish people constitute one dimension, one *nefesh*, one person.

He shares with them the message of the Sabbath, of working for six days and resting on the seventh. He enjoins them to kindle no fire in their homes on the Sabbath day. He thereby introduces them to the second dimension, that of time. He initiates the concept of sacred time, of a time which stands separate from the mundane and the ordinary.

The rest of the *parsha* describes the construction of what is to become a sacred place. A demarcated space set off from the rest of the spatial environment.

And throughout *Parshat Vayakhel*, we read of those whose “hearts are stirred up and whose spirits are willing” (*Exodus* 35:21) to come forward with the gifts and contributions out of which this space will be constructed. We read of the “wise hearted women... whose hearts stirred them up in wisdom” (*Ibid.* 35:26) and whose hands crafted the beautifully embroidered cloths that decorated this haven in space.

We also read of two individuals, Bezalel and Oholiab, who are “filled with a Godly spirit, with wisdom, understanding, and knowledge in all manner of workmanship.” (*Ibid.* 35:31)

These three utterly different dimensions delineate the physical reality of horizontal and vertical space, but even more so accentuate the spiritual reality of man. The human condition is such that space can be sanctified, that time can be hallowed, and that humans have a transcendent spirit that distinguishes them from the rest of the animal world.

This week’s Torah portion is often considered to be an uninspiring, even boring, list of irrelevant details. In truth, however, the lessons inherent in these three dimensions are

about as important as any in our Scripture.

First there is the lesson of *shana*, of the year, of time. We have the capability of setting aside special times for celebration, for introspection, for memory. And this capability has kept the Jewish people in good stead throughout their history. As the 19th century Jewish thinker Ahad Ha’am expressed it so well, “More than the Jewish people have kept the Sabbath; the Sabbath has kept the Jewish people.”

Then there is the lesson of *olam*, of the world around us, of space. There are places in the world which are home, and there are places which are exile. Indeed, “home is where the heart is”, in the psychological sense. But in the national and religious sense, the Land of Israel is our place, and our synagogues and study halls are our sacred spaces in every corner of the world.

Finally, there is the lesson of *nefesh*, of the personal soul. It is our spiritual potential that makes us able to sanctify time and place and thereby lend meaning and purpose to our existence.

A fourth dimension? Perhaps there is one. But for me, the three dimensions of *olam*, *shana*, and *nefesh* are more than sufficient to provide an agenda for religious life. What a powerful framework! And all encompassed in this week’s Torah portion. ■

In loving memory of
Claire Braun ז"ל
ציריל רות בת משה ישראל
On her 30th yartzeit - כ"ו אדר
May the learning in this issue be
לעילוי נשמתה
Her daughter - Judith Wasserman