



# A Taste of Torah

## Pure from the Source

By Rabbi Yaakov Zions

We've all heard of pure water and pure silver, pure air and pure fun, but have you ever heard of a pure shul? Does that term conjure up images of a special ritual-group or an environmentally-friendly synagogue building? I would like to propose another definition for this entry. The Vilna Gaon (Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, 1720-1797) taught that if a shul would be built by Jews with the proper intentions, using tools produced in the same manner, it would be impossible for foreign thoughts to enter one's mind while praying there! Such a "pure" spiritual edifice can't and won't be subjected to the effects of the mundane physical world.

In our parsha, Noach blesses his son Yefes, "May G-d expand Yefes, and he will dwell in the tents of Shem." (Noach 9:27) Rashi (ibid.) quotes the Gemara (Yoma 10a) which understands this verse as a reference to the two *Batei Mikdash* (Temples) which stood in Jerusalem. The first one had the special status of *Shechina* (Divine Presence), while the second one did not. The reason for this, explains the Gemara, is that the first *Bais Hamikdash* was constructed by Shlomo Hamelech (King Solomon), while the second was constructed under the auspices of the Persian king, Koresh (Cyrus). Accordingly, the verse reads as follows: May G-d expand Yefes, but He (G-d) will dwell (only) in the tents of Shem (the *Bais Hamikdash* of Shlomo Hamelech, a descendent of Shem). The Seforno (commentary on Torah by Rabbi Ovadia Seforno of Italy, c. 1470-c. 1550) explains this phenomenon in line with the above mentioned

concept. The *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) used in the desert was never destroyed by foreign powers; it was merely replaced by the more permanent *Bais Hamikdash*. This was because it was constructed under optimal conditions, with no outside help. The first *Bais Hamikdash*, though it merited the Divine Presence due to its construction by Shlomo, was susceptible to destruction due to the intervention of Chiram in its construction (see Kings I Ch. 5). The second *Bais Hamikdash*, built under Koresh's auspices, was even further down the scale, and didn't even merit the Divine Presence.

To further illustrate this concept, let us examine a fascinating story. The Gemara (Bava Metzia 85b) tells us of the great Rabbi Chiya, who worked diligently to prevent ignorance and spread Torah study. His method of teaching Torah consisted of growing flax, spinning it into nets, catching deer and (after giving the flesh to the poor) using the hides as parchment for seforim (Torah books). He would personally deliver these seforim to village children, whom he would teach, and then leave the seforim for them to study and teach from.

The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin of Volozhin, 1814-1893) in his Torah commentary *Ha'amek Davar* (Shemos 19:2) asks, why did this great sage go through the tedious process of obtaining home-made parchment; couldn't he find an easier method? He answers that Rabbi Chiya wanted to imbue these books with tremendous learning potential, through his personal and selfless devotion to the cause.

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## Stories For The Soul

### Integrity at All Costs

Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld (1848-1932) was a great rabbi who lived in Jerusalem at the turn of the 20th century. There was a communal fund that was used to help people pay for wedding expenses, and a family received four gold coins - a tidy sum in those days - toward the costs.

Rabbi Sonnenfeld was in charge of the fund, but when it came time to marry off his daughter, he did not want to personally take the money from the fund, nor directly ask for it, for his own needs. Instead, he waited for the *gabbai* (person who ran the day-to-day affairs) of the fund to offer him the money. Unfortunately, the *gabbai* neglected to do so, and Rabbi Sonnenfeld was left without the means to pay for the wedding. He approached a wealthy community member and asked him for a loan to pay for the expenses, and the man readily agreed to lend him the money.

The day after the wedding, the *gabbai* realized his oversight, and immediately went to give the four gold coins to the venerable sage. When he attempted to do so, however, Rabbi Sonnenfeld refused, saying, "The fund was established to help parents pay for their children's weddings, not to help them pay off their debts!"

In this week's parsha, the Torah informs us that the fate of the Generation of the Flood was sealed due to *chamas* - not outright theft, but a failure to treat the money of others properly. Our treatment of the possessions of others must be with the highest integrity.