

They shall make an Ark of shittim wood, two and a half cubits its length; a cubit and a half its width; and a cubit and a half its height. You shall cover it with pure gold, from within and from without shall you cover it. (25:10, 11)

The construction of the *Mishkan* -- its various components and accompanying vessels -- is replete with symbolism. The materials used for the *Mishkan*, its very measurements, and the manner of constructing its components are a source for much exposition by the various commentators. While we are not on the level of comprehending the mystical aspects and secrets involved in this holy edifice, there is great practical application to be derived from what we are able to understand.

The **Chafetz Chaim** explains the half-measurements of the *Aron* as alluding to the reality that no human being can claim to have achieved *sheleimus*, perfection, with regard to his knowledge and understanding of Hashem's Divine wisdom. The *Aron* housed the Torah, thus granting it symbolic status in connection with the Torah. The mere fact that the *Aron*, because it housed the Torah, was thus considered the central feature of the *Mishkan*, speaks volumes concerning the significance of the Torah in Jewish life. A Jew must strive to gain deeper, more encompassing knowledge of the Torah; regardless of how many times one has reviewed the same passage in any area of Torah erudition, each time he perceives a new approach, gleaned new insight. We are unable to measure the profundity of the Torah. Indeed, every time we study Torah, we realize how much more there is to know, how distant we are from really understanding the full depth of the Torah.

Horav Avraham Pam, zl, quoted by Rabbi Sholom Smith in "Shabbos with Rav Pam," suggests that this is the reason that each tractate of *Talmud Bavli* begins on *Daf Bais*, Page Two, rather than *Daf Aleph*, page one. This illustrates that there is no beginning to the Torah and certainly no end. We make *siyumim*, celebrating the completion of a tractate, *Seder Mishnayos*, *parsha* of *Chumash*. While it is certainly an achievement, in the scheme of Torah knowledge it is like a drop of water in a vast ocean. However, *Kol prutah u'prutah mitztarefes l'cheshbon gadol*, "Every penny combines (with one another) to account for a large total." We continue learning, and, with time, we will achieve an incredible grasp of Torah.

The *Aron* consisted of three boxes placed one in another, with the middle box being constructed of *shittim* wood. The outer and inner boxes were made of gold. This teaches that the character of a *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, should be *tocho k'baro*, his external character should coincide with his internal character. In other words, he must be real; what you see is who he is - through and through. *Middos*, character traits, are the true measure of a man. His essence is his character. One who learns Torah must demonstrate this through his *middos tovos*, positive character traits. Otherwise, his Torah learning is deficient.

The **Alter, zl, m'Kelm**, *Horav Simchah Zissel Ziv Broide*, was one of the primary disciples of *Horav*

Yisrael Salanter, zl, founder of the *mussar*, ethical character refinement, movement. As such, he devoted his life to training his own students to perfect themselves in the area of *middos*. Torah erudition without character development was flawed. Many stories abound concerning his personal refinement. The *Alter* was once traveling to small towns and villages on a fundraising trip on behalf of his *yeshivah* in Kelm. His travels brought him in contact with an eclectic representation of the Jewish community -- from men of great wealth and education to those who hailed from simple, rural backgrounds, with little or no education. They all had one thing in common: their respect for a Torah luminary. The greatness of the *Alter* was no secret, and any intelligent person could see on his face and from his demeanor that he was an unusual person. Wherever the *Altar* went, he was welcomed with great esteem.

During one of his trips, he stopped overnight on a farm. The farmer and his wife had heard of the sage and were eager to provide him with accommodations. Taking money for the provisions and lodging was out of the question. They were honored to host the *Rosh Yeshivah*. The farmer's wife was excited to be able to prepare a meal for *Rav Simchah Zissel*.

As she was preparing the meal, *Rav Simchah Zissel* struck up a conversation. He asked about their cow: does it provide sufficient milk? Do the chickens lay enough eggs? Was the quality of the eggs good? How was their potato crop? The farmer's wife was not bashful, and she gave lengthy answers to each question, going into detail, describing the health of the cow and chickens, and describing the work involved in planting a potato crop. During this whole time, *Rav Simchah Zissel* carried on a long, healthy, animated conversation with this simple woman.

Rav Simchah Zissel later explained his actions. This couple was very kind to give him a room and meals for a day. The next day, he would be gone and would probably not see these people for at least a year or two. They had refused to take any remuneration for the accommodations which they provided. How could he possibly pay them back? The only other way was to show them that they were relevant, that he cared about their lives. By showing them a friendly countenance, by taking an interest in the simple goals of their lives, by rejoicing over their achievement, and by lauding their accomplishments, he was providing payment for their time and efforts. *Rav Simchah Zissel* placed great value on his time. Nonetheless, small talk with the farmer's wife was his way of making payment for his accommodations. This is the meaning of refined ethical character traits.