



T'RUMA

One of the Angels

My grandmother was one of the angels. Like every Jewish grandmother, she loved each and every one of her grandchildren. As her oldest grandchild, I believed that I was surely her favorite. But I eventually discovered that my siblings and cousins were all equally convinced that they were her favorites.

She had a way of making us each feel special. I remember distinctly how even as a very young boy, I knew that in her eyes I could do no wrong. She was a typical grandmother in almost every way.

I say "almost" because in some ways, she was very different from her peers. She was one of the first women in New York State to receive a driver's license. I vividly remember the newspaper clipping on the bulletin board in her kitchen. It showed her receiving a certificate from some public official under the headline "Brooklyn Grandma is in the Driver's Seat". It didn't mention that said driver's seat was in a huge

Packard, one of the most glamorous cars then on the road.

Something else was unique about Grandmother. She was devoted to synagogue life. She spoke perfect English and rarely spoke to us in Yiddish, but she never used the word "synagogue". Instead, she called every Jewish house of worship "ah heilige sheel, a holy shul". She prayed privately twice a day and only attended sheel on Shabbat and festivals. But those were the most glorious moments of her week.

It is at this time of year, when the weekly Torah portion of T'ruma (Sh'mot 25:1-27:19) is read, that I am reminded of Grandmother's dedication to the shul. Parshat T'ruma enumerates the components of the Mishkan that the Jews built in the wilderness and describes what can be termed the first fundraising campaign in shul history.

Grandmother spearheaded shul building campaigns wherever she lived: the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Harlem, and finally Brooklyn. But it was not as a community activist that she conveyed her spiritual fervor to me. Rather, it was when she drove me and my cousin, in the shiny black Packard, to purchase kosher groceries in the "old neighborhood" every Sunday morning. She would drive over the Manhattan Bridge, and just as we crossed the river, she would point to

a large gray stone building just under the bridge. Her eyes would tear and her voice would choke every time we passed that building. In a very subdued voice, she would deliver this message: "That building was once a sheel, built by angels. Now it is no longer a sheel. It is a kloyster. Non-Jews worship there."

When we asked her why "we" lost it and whether it was really built by angels, she would respond evasively, in typical grandmotherly fashion, "You are too young for me to answer you. One day, when you are older, you will understand."

Grandmother passed away more than fifty years ago. Gradually, after her passing, I began to understand who the angels were who built the shul and why "we" lost it. I discovered the angels when perusing the Midrash Rabba on the Book of Kohelet one Sukkot afternoon. I came across this passage:

"Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa observed the people of his city bringing materials for the reconstruction of the Beit HaMikdash. He wished to follow their example. He found a large boulder that would serve well as part of the Temple's new wall. He sculpted the stone and polished it. But it was far too heavy for him to carry up to Jerusalem. He asked passersby to help him, but they would only do so for a fee, which he

could not afford. Finally, he beheld five strangers approaching him. They agreed to carry the stone, but only on the condition that he would place his hand on the stone. He did so and suddenly found himself, and the stone, miraculously transported to Jerusalem. The five men were nowhere to be found. He entered the Temple chamber in which the Sanhedrin sat and inquired after them. The sages told him that they were not men, but angels."

That passage in the Midrash taught me that those who simply lend a hand to a holy project are granted the assistance of the angels. Angels build shuls.

That's the good news. The sad news is that only angels can sustain shuls once they are built. Only when those who attend shul behave like angels, in a decorous and reverent manner, do shuls endure. Improper behavior in a house of prayer results in its ultimate destruction. More than one of our great sages has identified irreverence in the shul as the reason that many former Jewish houses of worship are now churches or mosques, theaters or museums, and often entirely destroyed.

I can hear Grandmother speaking to me today: "Shuls are built by angels, but we must behave in them as angels would. If we don't, we lose them." She recognized that the old grey building in Lower Manhattan

may have been built by angels, but it wasn't maintained by angels. It was maintained by those who came to shul to chatter idly, gossip maliciously, and cynically mock the rabbi and the cantor. No wonder "we" lost it.

Achieving proper shul decorum has been a perennial problem for the Jewish community. When a community gathers to build a new shul, it does so as a group of angels with noble motives. But as we grow accustomed to the shul, as it becomes too familiar to us, we lose our "angelic" enthusiasm.

The holy Zohar, the magnum opus of Jewish mysticism, devotes much of its commentary on this week's Torah portion to this very problem. It is excited by the Torah's description of a successful building campaign, of men and women generously donating gold and silver to the new Mishkan. But then the Zohar offers these words of caution: "Woe to the person who engages in mundane conversation in shul. He causes a cosmic schism, a degradation of faith. Woe to him, for he has no portion in the God of Israel. He demonstrates by his levity that God does not exist, and that He certainly is not to be found in the shul. He asserts that he has no relationship with Him, that he does not fear Him, and that he is indifferent to the disgrace of the Upper Celestial Realm."

With these words, the holy Zohar expresses in mystical terms what my Grandmother knew with her ample common sense. How well she taught me the lesson of our need to remain "angels" in shul. I can still hear her tearfully grieving for that heilige sheel, and all too numerous other sacred spaces, which "we" lost because of our callous indifference to the Almighty's presence.

Mrs. Gussie Hartman, Gitel bat Tzvi Hersh HaLevi a"h, rest in peace knowing that I am older, and that I understand, and that many others have just read your heartfelt message. 🕯️