

Half Empty – Parashat Teruma
Rav Hanan Schlesinger

We all know that one can look at the glass of life as half empty or half full – it all depends on your perspective. One of the keys to living a fulfilled life is to be able to count our blessings, to live with gratitude and appreciation for what we have. We want to see the good and not to dwell on the bad.

All that, however, is only partially true. As far as what we've got, it's certainly good to focus on what's in the glass and not on what's not in it. We want to live content and satisfied, and not to be constantly chasing an insatiable desire for more. But as far as spirituality and religion, the realm of what's called the soul, the opposite is actually the case; we ought to turn our gaze to the half of the glass that is empty. We should strive towards a deep realization not merely that we are half empty, but that we are in reality a bottomless pit. The better we become and the more we know, the more cognizant we are of how much further we have to go, and that the journey towards spiritual fulfillment and moral excellence is an endless one. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was wont to say, we must be satisfied with what we have, but never ever with who we are. Spiritual complacency is a disease that we must avoid at all costs. Rather, constantly striving to be better is what it's all about.

The great Hasidic master Rav Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbitz, saw a hint of this in the Torah portion that we are reading this week. All of the walls of the Tabernacle, as well as its furniture, were to be built according to specifications that are expressed in whole numbers. Whether it's five cubits or three, one handbreadth or two, there are no halves. Upon reading however, we see that the measurements of the Holy Ark that holds the Tablets of the Covenant are different: It is to stand two and a half handbreadths long by one and a half handbreadths wide, by one and a half handbreadths high. The receptacle for the foundational document that delineates our obligations towards man and God is constructed according to a blueprint expressed completely in terms of what we call in



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Hebrew ‘broken numbers’. Not whole handbreadths, but half handbreadths – for the length, the width, and the height.

What this teaches is that spiritually and morally, we are never whole, never complete. We are never fully consummated; our state is always only ‘half’. There is always an infinite path of soul development before us. We could be so much better, we could come so much closer to God. We could devote so much more time to that which is really important in life.

Again and again Rav Mordechai Yosef reminds us that life is a journey. An endless journey. You must know that you haven’t arrived...and never will. We must always experience the thirst, always feel the lack. What God wants of us is to be passionate and absolutely dedicated to the journey towards wholeness and truth. We must always be aware of being on the way, and our aspirations to move towards Him, to progress forward, must burn within us like a fiery furnace.

Our challenge therefore, is never to mistake the ‘half’ for the whole. Never to suppose that we have the full truth in our back pockets. We own many possessions, and we need no more. With the Torah we have acquired for ourselves, on the other hand, we will never be satisfied. Truth and human perfection are never a possession, always a goal.



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