Many have the impression that the Beit HaMikdash’s main function is to enable the offering of korbanot. However, the Beit HaMikdash is also the central location of Torah study. The Gemara (Yoma 52b) tells us that towards the end of the First Temple period, Yoshiyahu HaMelech hid the luchot in a special vault beneath the Temple Mount, constructed for this purpose by Shlomo HaMelech. The Gemara (53b-54a) brings a dispute among the Tannaim as to whether the luchot remained in this location during the period of the Second Beit HaMikdash or whether they were removed and taken to Bavel. The Rambam (Hilchot Beit HaBechira 4:1) cites the first opinion as to the current location of the luchot.

Rav Soloveitchik noted that the very fact the Rambam rendered a ruling regarding this machloket indicates that he viewed it not merely as a historical issue, but as one with halachic significance. The machloket revolves around the question of whether it is possible to have a Beit HaMikdash without the luchot. The accepted opinion maintains that for the Beit HaMikdash to be invested with kedusha, it must function as a Mishkan HaEduot, housing the luchot haEduot. As such, the Second Beit HaMikdash, by definition, must have housed the luchot, albeit in an underground vault. Thus, the essence of kedushat haMikdash rested on the fact that the Torah, in the form of the luchot, always remained within the Beit HaMikdash.

The Sifrei discusses a situation regarding whether the first word in the passuk, "מְעֹנָה אֱלֹקֵי קֶדֶם" – “The abode of G-d immemorial” (Devarim 33:27), should be spelled מְעֹנָה or מְעָנָה. The Tannaim resolved the question by checking the three Sifrei Torah in the azarah of the Beit HaMikdash. They determined the correct mesorah of the passuk based on the majority, as two of the three Sifrei Torah spelled the word מעונה. Why was the decision determined by these Sifrei Torah, and not by the majority of all the Sifrei Torah in the world?

Apparently, the Sifrei Torah in the azarah have special halachic status. Only the Sifrei Torah of the Beit HaMikdash serve the role of maintaining the mesorah of the text of Torah SheBichtav. Similarly, Midrash Rabbah (Devarim, parasha 9) teaches that Moshe Rabbeinu, who was very concerned about misrepresentation of the Torah, wrote 13 Sifrei Torah on the day he was to die, one for each of the 12 tribes and one to be placed in the Aron. This Sefer Torah in the Beit HaMikdash would be used to protect the authentic Torah text, to disprove anyone who sought to falsify it.

The Beit HaMikdash was also the central location of Torah SheBe’al Peh because it was the official meeting place of the Beit Din HaGadol (Supreme Court). The Sanhedrin was seated in the lishkat haGazit in the Beit HaMikdash. In other words, the Beit HaMikdash in its complete form is supposed to house the Chief Rabbinate. This is because, as the Rambam (Hilchot Mamrim 1:1) explains, the primary function of the Beit Din HaGadol is to serve as the “international kollel” of KIal Yisrael, to preserve the mesorah of the Torah SheBe’al Peh and transmit it to the next generation.

We can now understand the intent of the very phrase we recite after Shemoneh Esrei, which includes a request for two seemingly unrelated things: יִבָּנֶה בֵּית הַמִקְדָּשׁ בִּמְהֵרָה בְיָמֵינוּ, וְתֵן חֶלְקֵנוּ בְּתוֹרָתֶךָ – “that the Holy Temple be rebuilt, speedily in our days, and grant us share in Your Torah.” Since the Beit HaMikdash is the primary makom Torah, we ask for our portion in Torah together with a plea to rebuild the Beit HaMikdash.

While it is true that we have not been able to begin the building of the Beit HaMikdash, we recognize that preparations for its construction are underway. There are certain specific mitzvot that will hasten the coming of Mashiach, one of the most effective of which is Talmud Torah. The many yeshivot in the Old City, and the fact there is so much more Torah being learned than ever before – especially in the Old City – serve as preparation for the building of the Beit HaMikdash.

Adapted from Rav Schachter on the Moadim.

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The Beit HaMikdash as the Center of Limmud HaTorah