

Verse 7:2

מה יפּוּ פְּעָמֶיךָ בְּנֶעְלָיִם בַּת נְדִיב חֲמוּקֵי יָרֵכֶיךָ כְּמוֹ חֲלָאִים מְעֻשָׂה יְדֵי אָמֶן:

How lovely are your steps in shoes, O daughter of nobility, [as your throngs journey to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals].¹ The arcs formed by your thighs [as the throngs encircle the Temple courtyard]² are like ornaments, the work of a craftsman's hand.

Traveling and Building

Three Riddles

The use of the plural term *steps* suggests that the verse is alluding to two types of step. The riddle is: what are they? Our goal is to solve this riddle. We begin by noting two other riddles. We then develop an idea that solves all three riddles.

The two other riddles are as follows.

1. When God commanded Noah to build the ark, He told him to make it with **קִינִיִּם** – compartments (Genesis 6:14). The Midrash remarks (*Bereishis Rabbah* 31:9): “Just as a nest³ (קן) purifies a *metzora*, so, too, your ark will purify you.” What drove our Sages to interpret the word **קִינִיִּם** in a sense so different from its plain meaning?

2. Haggai prophesized (Haggai 1:2,7-8): “Thus said the Lord of Hosts, saying, ‘This people has said, “The time has not yet come, the time for the House of the Lord to be built.”’ ... Thus said the Lord of Hosts: ‘Set yourselves on the way! Go up to the mountain, bring wood, and build the House. I shall be pleased with it, and I shall be honored through it,’ said the Lord.” Why did the people repeat the phrase “the time”? And why was God’s reply so elaborate? He could have simply said: “The time has already come.” In particular, why did He have to tell them to bring wood? Surely the people knew on their own how to build a building. Why, then, did God mention this detail?

Let us proceed now to solve these riddles.

God Puts People In the Situation For Which They Are Suited

By way of preface, we note a basic principle: God puts people in the situation for which they are suited.⁴ For example, as we all know, there are different ways of making a living. Some make their living through heavy and low-paying labor, such as chopping wood or drawing water. Others make their living through light and lucrative work, such as making jewelry or trading in fine textiles or precious stones. The Holy One Blessed Be He arranges each man’s livelihood in accordance with his nature and disposition. If a person has great

¹ Based on *Chagigah* 3a, in line with the Maggid’s commentary on the verse.

² Rendering following *Metzudas Dovid*, in line with the Maggid’s commentary on the verse.

³ *Eitz Yosef* explains that the term *nest* refers to the two birds that a *metzora* brings as part of his purification process (Leviticus Ch. 14).

⁴ Sentence added to guide the flow.

physical strength, but has the intellect of a mule, the type of work suited to him is heavy physical work such as chopping wood and the like. If, on the other hand, a person has a broad and refined intellect, but is physically weak, the type of work suited to him is light work such as business or intellectual work. You cannot turn a woodchopper into a businessman. Even if you would give him ample capital for a major business venture, it would do him no good—financing is of no help to him, since he knows nothing about serious business affairs.

In exactly the same way, there are different ways of developing the soul. Some people, due to a limited intellect, are capable only of Bible study. Others are able to learn Mishnah. And so forth, on up to those whose broad understanding leads them to scale spiritual heights, ultimately reaching the supreme level that befits a Kohen Gadol. More generally, different generations have different spiritual natures, and God relates to each generation according to its nature.⁵

Thus King Solomon declares (Ecclesiastes 3:3): “There is a time to breach and a time to build.” When a generation is endowed with purity of heart, lofty spiritual talents, and fine character traits, the Holy One Blessed Be He builds them a Temple, so that they may minister before Him and devote their lives to sacred tasks. In this way, they rise to a very high spiritual level. Conversely, in a faithless, topsy-turvy generation,⁶ in which people are oblivious to God’s law, God breaches the Temple walls—the people do not need a Temple, for they do not know how to serve God with loyalty. As it is written (Jeremiah 11:15): “What is My Beloved One doing in My Temple, while she carries out her many wicked schemes?”⁷ God is saying: “The people have acted wickedly and fallen from their lofty spiritual level. What, then, do they need a Temple for?”

*The Building of the Tabernacle*⁸

We now begin our main discussion. We start with a question: in the generation of the wilderness, when God decided to bring His presence down to dwell among the people, why did He make them engage in the physical labor of building a Tabernacle? He could have brought the celestial Temple down to Earth, or created the Tabernacle with a mere word. Why, then, did God impose upon the people the burden of building the Tabernacle themselves?

The answer to this question is as follows. As we know, the Jews of the wilderness generation did not have so many merits. They had not yet reached the lofty spiritual level that would entitle them to stand in the palace of the King. Hence, in view of the principle we discussed above, they could not be granted the privilege of having the Divine Presence in their midst: they were unsuited for the privilege.⁹ God wanted to give the people the chance to gain merit, so they could become worthy of this privilege. He therefore commanded them to busy themselves with the construction of the

⁵ Again, sentence added to guide the flow.

⁶ Cf. Deuteronomy 32:20.

⁷ *Radak* explains that the verse is referring to idolatry—engaging in many different abominable forms of worship to many different deities.

⁸ A similar theme appears in the commentary on Verses 3:9–10.

⁹ Sentence added to provide a link with the preceding discussion.

Tabernacle—to build it with their own hands using materials that they themselves donated, each man according to his talents and resources. This undertaking, with all the effort it entailed, purified the people and brought them to the spiritual level necessary to stand before the Divine Presence. Thus it is written (Exodus 25:8): “And they shall make for Me a Sanctuary, and I shall dwell among them.” Initially, the Jewish People were not worthy of having the Divine Presence in their midst, but through the effort they would put forward in building the Tabernacle, they would *become* worthy – and *then* the Divine Presence would come down to dwell among them.

We can bring out the point further with an allegory. An orphan boy was raised by his relatives, who were all craftsmen: some were tailors, some were jewelers, and so on. The boy grew up to be exceptionally wise and of sterling character. And so, when the time came for him to marry, his relatives succeeded in making a match for him with the daughter of a very wealthy man. The bride's wealthy father obligated himself to give a very large dowry, and to provide his daughter with a generous supply of fine clothes and jewelry. Of the groom's relatives, he asked only that they provide a wedding suit for the groom. Before taking on this obligation, the groom's relatives consulted with each other and arrived at a plan for fulfilling it: “Even though we are too poor right now to afford a wedding suit, there is one thing we can count on to get us through. When the wedding day approaches, and the bride's father sets out to acquire the fine clothes and the jewelry that he promised for his daughter, surely we will be the ones doing the work. After all, who knows how to make fine clothes and jewelry like we do? And so, from the money we make on this job, we will be able to provide the wedding suit.”

The parallel is as follows. The Holy One Blessed Be He, through His faithful servant Moses, promised to set His presence down among us when the Tabernacle was completed. In fact, at the time of this promise, we were not worthy of this privilege. But when we built the Tabernacle, the lengthy process of building in itself elevated us to the necessary spiritual level. In this vein, the Midrash relates:¹⁰

When Israel finished the work of the Tabernacle, Moses came and blessed them, as it is written (Exodus 39:43): “And Moses saw the entire work, and, behold, they had done it [exactly] as the Lord had commanded – thus they had done. And Moses blessed them.”¹¹ With what blessing did He bless them? He said to them: “May the Divine Presence settle upon the work of your hands.” ... [As it is written (Psalms 90:17):] “May the sublimity of our Master, our God, come down upon us. May our handiwork establish this for us; may our handiwork establish it.”¹²

The verse from Psalm 90 is a plea that, through our efforts in building the holy Tabernacle, we merit to have the Divine Presence dwell among us.

¹⁰ *Sifra Shemini* 15. There are variant versions, e.g., *Tanchuma Pekudei* 11.

¹¹ In the original text of the *Sifra*, only a fragment of the verse is quoted.

¹² Homiletical rendering of the verse in accordance with the Maggid's commentary. Psalm 90 was composed by Moses.

A Sufficient Effort

Applying this idea, we can shed light on the following verse about the collection of materials for the Tabernacle (Exodus 36:7): "And the work [of collection] was enough (דים) for all the work to be done, and more." Seemingly, the suffix "ם" in the word דים is superfluous: it would have been enough to write simply די. But this added suffix conveys a message, which ties in with what we have said up to now. We bring out the point with an analogy.

Consider someone chopping wood into small pieces for firewood to cook some porridge. If he has no other purpose in chopping the wood, then he will chop exactly the amount of wood he needs to cook the porridge, and no more. But now suppose that his doctors have told him to chop wood for exercise, and in the process he is producing firewood that he can use to cook his food. In this case, it will not do for him to chop just enough for what he plans to cook. He also needs a proper exercise session. The amount of chopping that he does must be enough to satisfy both aims.

The same idea applies to the construction of the Tabernacle. Not only did the people need to assemble enough materials to construct the Tabernacle and all its vessels. They also needed to bring forward donations to the degree required to refine their souls and make them worthy of having the Divine Presence in their midst. The point of the verse we just quoted is to tell us that the people brought forward enough donations to satisfy both aims. The work of collection was דים—enough *for them*; that is, sufficient to prepare their souls for the Divine Presence. In addition, it was enough for all the work to be done, and more; that is, more than enough for Tabernacle structure and all the vessels.

The Jewish Returnees in the Time of Haggai

We can now understand the message of Haggai that we quoted at the outset. The Jews who returned to the Land of Israel with Haggai felt strongly that they did not merit having a Holy Temple and serving before God in His Holy Sanctuary. They had just come out of exile, and they felt sure that they had not yet reached the spiritual level necessary to be worthy of this privilege. As is brought out in the Book of Ezra, the people were lacking in good deeds, and had not yet cleansed themselves of the defilement that had built up upon them during the exile. Indeed, Ezra had to separate them from gentile women.¹³ Hence the people said: "The time has not yet come, the time for the House of the Lord to be built."

We bring out the point with another analogy. Consider a man with a young daughter. If he is wealthy, then he can easily provide all her marriage needs, but he will still hold back from making a match for her because of her age. He might be asked: "Why do you not marry off your daughter? Do you lack the means to provide a dowry and her various other needs?" To this question, he has a ready answer: "It is not because I lack the means that I have not yet made a match for her. Rather, it is because she is still too young to get married." Suppose, however, that the man is poor, and does not have the means to provide his daughter's marriage needs. Then, if someone asks him why he does not try to marry off

¹³ Ezra Chs. 9-10. This incident occurred after the building of the Second Temple, but evidently the intermarriages occurred beforehand. The incident reflects the low spiritual state of the people of that era.

his daughter, he will reply: "There are two reasons. First, she is not yet old enough to get married. Second, it is anyway not a good time for me to try to marry her off, because I do not yet have the means to provide her marriage needs."

This analogy explains the repetition of the phrase "the time" in the passage from Haggai. The Jewish People were arguing that it was not a good time for the House of the Lord to be built, because they were not yet spiritually ready for it. God replied: "Go up to the mountain, bring wood, and build the House. I shall be pleased with it, and I shall be honored through it." The construction of the Temple involved a massive effort—and the effort itself would render the people worthy of having the Divine Presence in their midst.

Noah

Let us now turn to the riddle of the Midrash about Noah. It is clear that Noah and the animals were saved by sheer miracle, with natural processes playing no role whatsoever. Another Midrash about Noah, which *Rashi* quotes, brings out this fact (*Bereishis Rabbah* 31:12): "You were a [mere] carpenter—if not for the covenant I made with you, you would not [even] have been able to enter the ark. Thus it is written (Genesis 6:18): 'And I shall establish My covenant with you.' When? When you enter the ark [as the verse continues: 'and you shall enter the ark']."¹⁴ Thus, we might well ask why God made Noah go through the trouble of making the ark—for even after he did so, a miracle was necessary to save him. God could easily have saved Noah from the flood through miracle alone, without the ark.¹⁵

Indeed, when God saved Abraham from Nimrod's fiery furnace, He did so without employing any natural mechanism at all. Thus it was also when He saved Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah from Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace, and Daniel from the lion's den. In fact, God favors bringing about a deliverance that is devoid of natural factors, because then the miracle is more evident. Thus, for example, when Gideon went to battle against Midian, God directed him to wage the battle with only three hundred men. Initially, Gideon went forth with a large force, but God told him (Judges 7:2): "The force that is with you is too large for Me to deliver Midian into their hand, lest Israel pride itself over Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'" God wanted it to be clear that the victory was wrought by His hand alone.¹⁶

¹⁴ The commentators on the Midrash elaborate: "Do not think that, now that you have built the ark, if you enter it you will be saved by natural means. Under the usual scheme of nature, you would not even have been able to enter the ark, for you and your ark would have been torn to bits in an instant by marauders and wild animals."

¹⁵ *Ramban* on Genesis 6:19 answers this question as follows: Whenever God brings about a miracle, He requires first that man do the maximum that is in his power, even if this effort is bound to fall far short of the goal. Once man does everything that he can, God brings about the miracle. The Maggid takes a different approach.

¹⁶ Sentence added to complete the thought. There is a competing principle that God prefers to be sparing with miracles. The Maggid himself mentions this principle in *Ohel Yaakov, Parashas Masei*. Cf. the Maggid's commentary on Esther 1:1 (the piece entitled *Portent of Woe* in *VoR&S*). The two competing principles are well illustrated in *Shabbos* 53b. The Gemara there tells of a poor widower with an infant child, for whom God performed a miracle to enable him to nurse the baby himself. Rav Yosef regards this miracle as showing the man's greatness, whereas Abaye regards it as showing his lowliness. It

Thus, it appears that the only reason why God made Noah go through the trouble of making the ark was to give him a chance to earn merit. The Midrash says that Noah deserved to perish in the flood along with the rest of the world, but he found favor in God's eyes.¹⁷ Noah was lacking in good deeds and was not worthy of being saved. Only by carrying out God's command to build the ark did he reach his high spiritual level and become worthy.

In this connection, the Torah relates (Genesis 6:22): "And Noah acted in accordance with everything that God commanded him—thus did he do." That is, Noah's intent in building the ark was not to save himself, but rather simply to do as God had commanded him. And so, the Torah continues (Genesis 7:1): "And the Lord said to Noah, 'Come over to the ark—you and all your household—for I have seen you as being righteous before Me in this generation.'" Noah made himself into a righteous man by fulfilling God's command faithfully.

The Midrash¹⁸ relates that Noah did not enter the ark until the water reached his ankles, for he was not convinced until then that God would bring a flood upon the world. The Midrash considers this a fault—a sign that Noah lacked faith. We could, however, also consider it as a point of merit—that his intent in everything he did was simply to heed God's word. He was not acting out of fear of the flood, for he did not believe that God would actually bring the flood. He thought that the people would repent, or that God would simply cancel His decree out of mercy.

Indeed, as *Rashi* comments on Genesis 7:12, when God first brought the rain, He did so with mercy: if the people would repent, the rain would become rain of blessing. Only when the people failed to repent did the rain turn into flood-rains. Thus, the Torah relates (Genesis 7:7): "And Noah entered the ark, with his sons, his wife, and his son's wives with him, because of the waters of the flood." Only when Noah saw that the rain had turned into flood-rains did he enter the ark, for until then he thought that the people would repent and the rains would become rains of blessing. It seems more fitting to view Noah's delay in entering the ark as a point of merit rather than as a fault, for the entire section of the Torah dealing with Noah and the ark is devoted to praising Noah and describing how he became worthy to be saved.

We can now address the puzzling Midrash about Noah that we quoted at the outset. Let us first recall this Midrash. When God commanded Noah to build the ark, He told him to make it with קינים—compartments. The Midrash remarks: "Just as a nest (קן) purifies a *metzora*, so, too, your ark will purify you." On the surface, this Midrash appears to interpret the word קינים in a sense very different from its plain meaning, but we will explain the Midrash in a way that fits with the plain meaning of the verse. The Midrash seeks to explain why God made Noah go through the trouble of making a separate "nesting place" for each animal species. It is no answer to say that the purpose was to keep the animals from harming each other. God could have kept the animals from harming each other by means of a miracle, just as He kept the fruits from

appears that the Maggid's approach to the matter is as follows: God generally prefers to avoid performing miracles, but when He does decide to perform one, He makes it unmistakable.

¹⁷ *Bereishis Rabbah* 28:9 on Genesis 6:7–8.

¹⁸ *Bereishis Rabbah* 32:6 on Genesis 7:7.

rotting, and just as He led all the animals and birds to come to the ark on their own in the numbers that He had specified.¹⁹ The Midrash answers by saying that just as a nest (יֵר) purifies a *metzora*, so, too, the work of building the ark purified Noah.

Throughout the process of building the ark, Noah was like a person learning Torah and fulfilling its commandments. God gave Noah detailed instructions regarding each and every aspect of the ark's construction. The building of the ark thus became a laborious project. God set it up this way so that the work of building the ark would elevate Noah and make him worthy of being saved.

*The Exodus from Egypt to the Land of Israel*²⁰

In a similar vein, when the Jewish People left Egypt, God directed them to take the long route through the wilderness, rather than the short route through the land of the Philistines (Exodus 13:17-18). The reason is that the people had not yet attained their proper spiritual level. Thus, the Midrash²¹ relates that when God told Moses to take the Jewish People out of Egypt, Moses asked: "What merit do the people have that will enable me to take them out?" God replied (Exodus 3:12): "When you take the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain." It is through this same merit that God gave the people the Land of Israel. By adhering to their Creator's will and carrying out His commands, the people became worthy to be redeemed. And the forty years that they spent in the wilderness perfected them and made them ready to enter the Holy Land. As it is written (Jeremiah 2:2): "I remember on your behalf the devotion of your youth, the love of your bridal days—how you followed along after Me in the wilderness, in a land unsown." Had the people taken the short route, through the land of the Philistines, they would not have accumulated enough merits to be worthy of entering the Land of Israel—they would not have been fully purified.

The Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

The same idea underlies the mitzvah to journey to Jerusalem for the three pilgrimage festivals. By and large, in the setting of their homes, the Jews were too lacking in merit to make an appearance before God. But the long journey from their homes to Jerusalem in itself sanctified them and elevated them to a high spiritual level, so that when they reached the gates of Jerusalem they were fit to enter the grounds of God's sanctuary.

We can now solve the riddle with which we began: why does our verse allude to two types of steps? The answer is that when the Jews went up to Jerusalem for the festivals, they were actually making *two* journeys. The first was the physical journey—the arduous trek on the road. The second was the spiritual journey to the heights of sanctity. With every step they took, as they drew physically closer to Jerusalem, they drew spiritually closer to God.²²

¹⁹ See *Rashi* on Genesis 6:18 and on Genesis 7:9.

²⁰ A related discussion appears in the commentary on Verses 2:10-13 above.

²¹ *Shemos Rabbah* 3:4 on Exodus 3:11-12.

²² The Gemara says (*Taanis* 30b): "Whoever mourns over Jerusalem gains merit through which he sees its rejoicing." The Gemara does not say *will see*, but rather *sees*. One way to explain the Gemara is as follows: every tear that is shed in mourning over Jerusalem is in itself a step towards its rebuilding. This idea ties in with the Maggid's discussion here.