

Building to put down roots

AUSTRALIANS and Israelis have something in common: they are both world travellers. Wherever you go, either on or off the beaten track, you can be sure to find falafel-eating or akubra-wearing tourists. As Jews, what do we do when we visit a far-off destination? Whether we are regular shul attendees or not, many of us seek out the local synagogue.

For those who are not frequent flyers (or frequent frummers, as the shul-going fraternity may be labelled) it may seem like an odd thing to do. But when we go to shul in an unfamiliar destination, there is something both interesting and reassuring about the experience. We see the familiar ark, Torah scrolls, everlasting light and bimah – they may be of a different design but they are there.

In a world of constant change and real-time news updates, as well as being a source of historical and cultural interest, shuls provide us with a haven for constancy, reflection and introspection.

Consider the Israelites in the desert. They had left the constancy of their home environment and had fled from Egypt, pursued by murderous armies and protected by the Divine. They relied upon miracles for food and for military assistance. They carried with them their worldly possessions.

Torah topic

תּוֹרָה

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Parashat Terumah instructs the Israelites in the building of the tabernacle and the instructions are very detailed. Previous parashiyot tell of war, evacuation, miracles and wonders – this one reads like an Ikea instruction manual, only without the pictures. In an era of constant change, flux and uncertainty, this was the first attempt to codify the structure of the place of worship. Terumah is the blueprint for the Temple and therefore the future shuls.

The detail is impressive – acacia wood, specific dyes, gold (likely to be 100 kilograms for the cover of the ark alone) but the message is clear: now that we have dealt with the things that have threatened our existence, we are now able to focus on the things that will bring us stability.

It is a sign of strength and confidence when communities build. It means that they are in it for the long haul and they feel settled enough to invest in infrastructure. Consider Australian Jewry: our community was built, to a large extent, by those who experienced war and genocide but, like the Israelites in the desert,

once survival was assured, they set about building. And boy, did we build! Schools, mikvahs, aged-care homes and shuls to name a few.

We are held in high esteem throughout the world. Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson wrote in *The Australian* that Jews “have maintained an identity as a community and a sense of peoplehood, religion, tradition, culture and history while at the same time engaging at the cutting edge of whatever the world has to offer”. One way that we have done this is by building world-class community institutions, serving the community and helping us to grow together.

We have taken the words of Terumah to heart by doing this, but whereas Terumah’s tabernacle was constructed as a portable community centre, ours are rooted in the red soil of Australia. We look to Israel, our beautiful Jewish homeland, for inspiration and leadership and we rejoice when our community members fulfil the mitzvah of aliyah, settling in the land. But we also look inwards to our community here in Australia, introspecting and meditating in our many shuls and communal inspirations, enthused by Terumah’s exhortation to move beyond survival to growth.

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