

Parashat Devarim 5777 Form over Function?
Rabbi Jonathan Hecht, Ph.D.
Temple Chaverim

There are some debates that are ageless, like “what came first, the chicken or the egg?” Or, “do you consider yourself to be an American Jew, or a Jewish American?”

Tonight, I want to talk about a debate that started in the field of architecture:

Does “form follow function,” or does “function follow form”?

Or, to put it differently: which is more important... the form that a building takes, or the function that it is designed for?

Is it more important for a building to work properly... in terms of a building “does it keep you dry, warm, and have enough space and light,” or, to look amazing from an aesthetic perspective?

I’d like to take an informal vote now. form... function?

Most people want their buildings to be functional, but functional can be pretty boring, too. Functional doesn’t really “inspire” people. Take the synagogue for example: what is more important... the feeling you get when you come inside? Or the fact that you have a place to sit and read the prayer book?

Form vs. Function...

Has anyone here been to Temple Emanuel in NYC? The sanctuary is awe inspiring and the experience you get from praying there makes you feel a certain way. But the room is so big that air conditioning and heating is difficult, and the lighting is somewhat problematic.

It is a different experience altogether than sitting in a bland room, even though it might have better lighting and climate control.

Does anyone want to change their vote? Form over function or Function over form?

This week we begin a new book in the Torah, Deuteronomy, that reminds me of this debate:

Deuteronomy is concerned about the “form” of worship. Unlike the rest of the Torah, where we find that our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, set up altars and pray to God wherever they happened to be. Deuteronomy insists that there is ONLY ONE place that you can pray to God: in the place that God designates... the central shrine in Jerusalem.

There is only one way to pray, too. Through the sacrifices that are offered there.

The form of worship and the place of worship are the most important things.

And there will be an established priesthood and a person designated as King.

Form over function is what the book of Deuteronomy teaches us.

However, the rabbis have something very interesting to say about this question, too, and they express it through the selection of the Haftarah portion that goes along with the beginning of Deuteronomy.

The rabbis selected for this week's Haftarah a passage from the book of Isaiah that is so powerful that the opening word of the Haftarah חזון, "vision," is the name given to this Shabbat. This week is Shabbat Chazon... the Sabbath of Vision.

Let's take a look at it. Page 1590. You can see from the description that this Haftarah portion is always read the week before Tisha B'Av, the day on which we remember the destruction of the Temple.

The portion begins vs. 1-4... what is their sin?

vs. 10-13 ... we see that the sacrifices are not pleasing to God

vs. 16-17 ... we see what God actually wants!

With the book of Deuteronomy, a book that devotes itself to the establishment of FORM, we get a message from the Haftarah that it is FUNCTION that God really wants...

Or, more precisely, if you do the ritual but forget the REASON for the ritual, then your ritual is meaningless.

Form may be important but it cannot come at the expense of function. That is what Isaiah teaches.

Why was the Temple destroyed? The people put all their emphasis on the forms, on the rituals, and they forgot the ethics that are the reasons of why they were doing what they were doing.

Isn't that often true in our lives?

Is the health care debate about the Democrats winning or the Republicans winning or is it about working together to provide the best and most rational system of health care for all Americans?

As long as we call it “Obamacare,” and if that is replaced by something called “Trumpcare,” then we are putting form over function!

There is a controversy right now over the Kotel... the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Is it an orthodox synagogue, where only one type of Judaism is allowed, or is it a national symbol for all Jews?

There was an agreement to enlarge the prayer space and create an entrance to a space for egalitarian prayer. It was voted on and approved. But then, the Israeli Prime Minister put his interest of holding together his governing coalition over the interests of the Jewish people as a whole.

The Prime Minister and his allies in the government are putting form before function.

The tragedy of Tisha B’Av, which we will observe next week, was that our ancestors placed ritual above doing what was right... it seems that we, their descendants, still have a lot to learn:

Form is important, but if it comes at the expense of Function, it is bound to fall apart.

The Temple was destroyed because form was placed before function... true Chazon, true vision, comes from living by your values, in religion, in politics, and in life.

Shabbat Shalom