Leaving An Unfinished Wall To Remember The Bet HaMiqdash

Although our official and collective mourning for the Bet-haMiqdash concludes the day after Tish’a beAb, our rabbis mentioned some traditions associated with mourning that we keep privately and throughout the year as a permanent reminder that our Bet- haMiqdash has not yet been rebuilt.

The Gemara in Baba Batra 60b mentions that when a Jewish individual builds a house the walls should not be decorated with eccentric rugs, mats or other luxurious elements. Thus says Maimonides משחרב בית המקדש , תיקנו חכמים שהיו באותו הדור שאין בונין לעולם בניין מסוייד ומכוייר כבניין המלכים ; אלא טח ביתו בטיט , וסד בסיד , ומשייר מקום אמה על אמה כנגד הפתח בלא סיד.

“When the Bet haMiqdash was destroyed, the Rabbis of that generation decreed that a Jew should not build a building [= his private residence] and decorate it [luxuriously] like the residences of kings. What must be done is the following: when one [erects the walls and] applies clay and plaster, one should leave a space of one *ama* [0.5 m, approximately 20 inches] by one *ama* without plaster [=unfinished]. ” From here, we learn two traditions : 1. We should not decorate the walls of our homes in an eccentric ostentatious manner, out of respect for the Bet haMiqdash that still lies in ruins 2. An unfinished space should be left on a wall near the main entrance of the house. (Bet Yosef, Sh. A., OH 560).

Other rabbis following the Tur’s opinion (Rabbenu Yehiel ben Asher) were less strict and did not limit the type of decoration or design that a one might want to use for his house. In their opinion, when building a private house, it is only necessary to leave at the entrance of the house, in front of the main door, an unfinished, unpainted segment of the wall. Most contemporary rabbis follow this second opinion.

The size of this unfinished segment of the wall is a square of approximately half a meter by half meter. Similarly, when one cover the walls of the house with decorative paper instead of paint, one must still leave a square of half a meter by half a meter without paper.

If possible, this unfinished wall should be the wall opposite

the entrance of the house, or as close as possible to the entrance door. So every time we enter the house we see this unfinished wall and we remember that Yerushalayim is still incomplete.

Among Ashkenazi Jews it is customary to leave the unfinished segment of the wall not opposite the door but above the entrance door.

QUESTION: Since the original decree literally said that “when you build your house you should leave and unfinished space” , if one buys a house that was already built by someone else, does one still need to scrap the plaster and uncover a segment of the wall?

It depends. If the person who built and previously lived in that house was Jewish, he had the obligation to leave a wall unfinished, and if he did not, the obligation now falls on the new owner of that house, which must remove a wall segment. However, if the original owner was not Jewish, he was not required to leave an area of □□the wall unfinished, and technically, the new Jewish owner, has no obligation to do so now (Shulhan ‘Arukh, OJ 560: 1).

In this last case and in any other case where technically there is no obligation to leave a segment of the wall unfinished (a rented house, for example), it is not forbidden to do so. Some families would hang a picture or a decorative painting of Yerushalayim with the words □□□□□□□ □□□□□ □□ … “If I forget you, oh Yerushalayim! etc”. So that each time we enter our home we will remember that the Bet-haMiqdash– the House of HaShem–is still incomplete, and this would motivate us to pray for our Temple to be rebuilt, B’H soon in our days. AMEN!