

Terumah 5778

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Our Torah portion for this Shabbat, Terumah, deals with the Building of the Mishkan, the portable tabernacle that The Children of Israel built in the desert to accompany them on their travels. Moses is still on Mount. Sinai, receiving the instructions from God, and according to our Sidrah, he was told to take a freewill offering from everyone whose heart is so inclined to give the offering. The Torah then goes on to stipulate exactly what is acceptable as an offering, which we shall look at in a moment. Moses is then told that he should build the altar and its furnishings according to the plan that God gives him.

Now according to Traditional Jewish thinking, Moses received not just the Ten Commandments on Sinai nor did he receive just the Written Torah, but Moses received the whole gambit of Jewish Tradition while on Mount Sinai. This is known as 'Torah l'Mosheh miSinai'. In the Talmud, in Pirkei Avot, The Sayings or Ethics of the Fathers it opens with: Moses received the Torah from Sinai and passed it on to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets passed it on to the Men of the Great Assembly. The Men of the Great Assembly were a group of Jewish leaders who ruled roughly between the years of 410BCE to 310BCE that is shortly after the Destruction of the First Temple into the early years of the Period of the Second Temple.

However, according to modern Biblical Scholarship, the Torah is a well edited manuscript drawing on various ancient sources. It is thought that there were at least four main sources known as J, E, P, and D. The J and E sources refer to the Hebrew name of God used in the particular text. J being those texts that refer to God by the tetragrammaton, the Yud,. Heh, Vav, Heh which we pronounce Adonai, as opposed to the texts referring to God as Elohim, as found in the E source. The P source being the Priestly laws and D being the Deuteronomistic Source as found in the last Book of the Torah.

So, here we have this People, B'nei Yisrael, The Children of Israel who have been slaves in Egypt for years and are asked to bring freewill offerings to build a sanctuary and the things they must bring are: gold, silver and copper; blue, purple and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats hair, rams' skins dyed red, sealskins and acacia wood; oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and the sweet incense; onyx stones and other stones to be set, for the ephod and the breastplate. We know that according to The Plaut Chumash acacia wood and other types of wood were used in Canaanite worship, while ramskins, lambskins, cloth of goat's hair were manifestations of nomadic existence. I sometimes wonder where the Children of Israel got all those things in the wilderness. I can just picture them carrying it in their rucksacks, along with the energy bars and first aid kits and sunscreen for their long journey in the desert. I can imagine the mothers saying, "Just pack it, you might need it along the way - you never know." How do you know what to pack for a journey into the unknown? And how do we know what gifts to bring to create a place for God to dwell? The Torah later tells Moses to tell the People that there is enough, they must stop bringing or giving. The standard joke is that this was the first and last Jewish building project that was oversubscribed.

God says to the Israelites: V'asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham, "Let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." Theoretically, surely God did not need a sanctuary in order to dwell among the people. After all, does the God who created the universe need a human-made dwelling place? No, what God is saying is that some human effort is required if the people want God to be among them.

Rabbi Pinchas HaCohen. Peli, a Modern Israeli Orthodox Rabbi wrote:

"Besides the immediate purpose of the campaign, to collect materials for the building of a sanctuary, it also serves an educational purpose: to convert the people from passive participants in their relationship with the Lord, as constant recipients of His gifts, into active partners.

The dwelling of God among the people cannot take place while the people are passive and do nothing to help bring the sacred into the world. "And let them make me a sanctuary—that I may dwell among them." God's dwelling among the People, or for that matter, God dwelling among humanity is on the condition that they make the sanctuary. . . .Man must start out on the path towards God . . . in order for God to meet him half-way as his partner in the act of K'dushah, of sanctification.

As magnificent as some sanctuaries are, and as inspiring as our places of worship may be, we still understand that it is not in the place where we find God that is of primary importance. The physical space is only one tool, one means of reaching the sacred. We all know people who claim that they find God in nature rather than within the walls of a building. Jewish tradition recognizes this, Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michal, known as Malbim, didn't ignore or replace the obligation to build a sanctuary for the community to worship, study and gather in. Rather, Malbim added to it by addressing the outer limit of the verse's meaning. His goal was to expand the ways we have to fulfill the injunction. How did he build his case? Malbim was a commentator and a Hebrew grammarian, who lived in the 19th century. He recognized that "among them" is written "B-tocham" where the prefix "b-" can mean in, among or with. It creates the possibility that the text is telling us that the sanctuary we build will welcome God to dwell in, among or with us. Malbim saw a textual opening. The magnificent synagogues we build surely fulfill the meaning of the command. We gather in the synagogue's sanctuary to encounter God through prayer and ritual. Here, God dwells "b-" with us.

Let's read it differently now. God also dwells "b-" in us. Malbim teaches that we are each to build a Tabernacle in our own heart for God to dwell in. Obviously, this is the greater task that depends on each one of us alone. Building the synagogue required an entire community. In the Torah, Moses commands all the people "whose hearts are so moved" to volunteer their skills and gifts to create the sanctuary. But, making a place in our hearts is an individual effort. It's presumably more difficult, but if we succeed it might also be more special.

He chose to read v'shachanti b'tocham, "I will dwell among them" as "I will dwell within them." He wrote: ". . . in them, the people, not in it, the sanctuary. We are each to build a Tabernacle in our own heart for God to dwell in."

The Hebrew letters shin-kaf-nun from the root of the words "mishkan" (sanctuary) "Shekhinah" (the Divine Presence) and "shakhein" (neighbor). There is definitely a connection between people who live together or come together for a common purpose. When they connect for a sacred purpose, the connection between them takes on a sacred quality. May God give us the strength, the courage and the guidance to make that connection, and as Rabbi Lea has said in her article on the

Sidrah in this week's Jewish Chronicle: "...our sidrah teaches that God will dwell among us if we just invite Her in".

Amen