

Terumah 2/08 - the building of the mishkan, and G-d's presence:

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Last week, we left Moshe Rabeinu having ascended Mt. Sinai alone – leaving Aaron and the elders behind as he entered the cloud which covered the mountain - awaiting to act as scribe and memorialize for one and all the word of G-d...

This week we return to the Torah and Moshe Rabeinu upon Mt. Sinai –“Adonai spoke to Moses saying: Speak to the children of Israel, and have them take for Me an offering; from every person whose heart inspires him to generosity, you shall take My offering...”... Offering, Gift, To Lift Up – translations of Terumah – our parasha hashavua.

For this morning's drash, I was asked to not merely give my thoughts, findings, and interpretations on Terumah, but to summarize for you the portion – one of the most difficult for me to relate to within the 5 books of Moses. And, while I have too often wished to merely read through this portion, this time was been different... I have searched within it and within myself to find the lessons previously hidden from me within Terumah – a portion with incredibly detailed descriptions of riches to delight the senses...

Terumah is a portion with which I have grappled, as I have said more than once, for its seemingly lack of depth, its opulence and detailed construction plans –As I am neither a designer nor architect, I had been previously disinterested and baffled by the length to which G-d had gone to describe for Moses how the Mishkan, the ark, its covering, its inside and outside, the altar upon which it would rest, the courtyard, and a menorah shall be fashioned... for that is the crux of this portion ... it is the detailed plans by which all these elements shall be constructed.

So – one begins her search to find deeper meaning from this blueprint. I could (like the commentaries I consulted and our tradition) go off in many directions – what is the significance of G-d having felt this should be the first instruction to give Moses to write upon the tablets? Why the materials chosen? Why materials “offered” only from those “whose heart so moves him”?

I believe that through my search within and without that I have found from this seemingly lacking in spiritual sense parasha a wonderful web of spiritual significance – for me – and, possibly for all of us.

Again, Terumah begins with G-d speaking to Moses, saying: Speak to the children of Israel and have them take for Me an offering, from every person whose heart inspires him to generosity.

G-d then continues, providing an amazing list of acceptable offerings: Gold, Silver, and Copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats’ hair, tanned ram skins, tachash skins, and acacia wood; oil for lighting spices for the anointing oil and for the aromatic incense; Shoham stones, and gemstones for setting in the efod and in the breastplate. Fifteen materials in all...

And, I pause – I close my eyes and am awed by the site and smells of such riches, colors, and scents. For what are all these precious materials – and, why only those materials received by persons willing to voluntarily part with them?

... let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them... Exactly as I show you – the pattern of the Mishkan and the pattern of its furnishings – so shall you make it.

The Chassidic Masters say that these materials correspond to the components of the human being. Gold is the soul; silver the body; copper the voice; blue the veins; purple, the flesh; red, the blood; flax, the intestines; goat hair, the hair; ram skins dyed red, the skin of the face; tachash skins, the scalp; shittim wood, the bones; oil for lighting, the eyes; spices for the anointing oil and for the sweet incense, the nose, mouth and palate; shoham stones and gemstones for setting, the kidneys and the heart.”

So – could it be that we are being instructed to make a metaphorical image of ourselves? Simply put, have we not been taught that our body is our temple? Is our body nothing more than a metaphorical image of the Mishkan – the tabernacle within which G-d dwells among us?

The Mishkan is to be our meeting place – a place and space from where we have left behind the mundane and we enter the realm of the spiritual – between which a veil is hung... it is where we place the treasured Pact between G-d and G-d's people – as Rashi has said, the “testimony between G-d and you (Israel) that G-d commanded us [to fulfill] the commandments written in it... our guide posts through this life – to make ourselves holy.

So – for a moment I digress and consider Where do we place our “sacred” texts and pacts? Our Chetubot – letters from dear friends, partners, parents, siblings, or children? Physical representations of the bonds we share and treasure? Such love given voluntarily and of free will – do we not have drawers, boxes, books, into which we have safeguarded these, and when we come upon them – pause from our worldly tasks to re-read them – is our love not rekindled to such an unimaginable height, filling our bodies with a physical sensation only experienced through the power of such love?

And, I ask - why do we need to keep these letters? Can we not call upon this love without something tangible? Can we not accept and be enriched by the intangible.

no, for we are but human... and, it is because of that humanity that G-d knew that we needed to have a meeting place – for while “Jewish tradition teaches that we experience God in many ways -- in nature, in the love and friendship, in acts of kindness, in celebration, in the study of Torah... that we needed a place to meet G-d, and for this reason “G-d directs the building of the sanctuary so that we may have a visual assurance of G-d’s presence amongst us.” And, such a sanctuary should signify the sanctity of this relationship – hence the beauty, so that we should be in awe in the presence of the Almighty.

G-d is with us – wherever we are... as we travel through the desert, or sit upon a mountaintop, or watch a child’s first steps, and feel that child’s hug, or sitting with a friend who is in need... G-d’s presence is with us, but we do not always call upon that – when driving in traffic, stressed by the pressures of schedules and lives so busy and filled with the demands of work, family, and community. So – G-d has instructed us to build an ark which can be transported – for our relationship is indeed not limited by the walls of any sanctuary.

*They shall make for Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell amidst them (25:8)*

There was once a king who had an only daughter, and one of the kings came and married her. When her husband wished to return to his country, her father said to him: "My daughter, whose hand I have given you, is my only child; I cannot part with her. Neither can I say to you, 'Do not take her,' for she is your wife. This one favor, however, I ask of you: wherever you go to live, prepare a chamber for me that I may dwell with you, for I cannot leave my daughter."

In the same way, G-d said to Israel: "I have given you the Torah. I cannot part with her, and I also cannot tell you not to take her. But this I request of you: wherever you go, make for Me a house wherein I may dwell."

(Midrash Rabbah)

Terumah is our voluntary offering to G-d to lift up – piece by piece – precious element by precious element – the covenant we keep with G-d. Whether within the sanctuary or outside. We take with us this pact to live according to the Torah – to not only keep G-d's presence with us, but in doing so to act as G-d has instructed us. It has been said that the physical dimensions of the Holy Temple and ark, as detailed in Terumah, may serve as a “model for the spiritual landscape of the soul... with numerous domains, chambers, and vessels corresponding to our inner lives, divine functions, and purpose.

It is my hope that we will remember the dazzling gold and silver, the deep colors of crimson and lapis lazuli, the rich and powerful smells of the incense – the teachings of G-d and G-d's love for us, so that we may travel forward and make each step a guided and holy step.