

Good morning and Shabbat shalom.

This morning, I am honored with the task of giving the D'var Torah on Parashat Terumah on this Brotherhood and Social Action Shabbat. I thank the leadership of the Brotherhood for this honor.

Terumah is the 19th parashah since Bereshit, the story of creation. Since Bereshit, we have read the inspiring stories of the Patriarchs, culminating in the dramatic Joseph narrative. More recently, we have read, in the book of Exodus (Shemot) the engaging and dramatic story of the exodus from Egypt, the victory at the Sea of Reeds, and 2 weeks ago in Parashat Yitro, the divine revelation and the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai. But the last third of the book of Exodus is devoted to the building of the Miskan, the portable sanctuary. This often repetitious recital of the parts, supplies, and measurements required to build this structure is not very interesting. It reads like a set of blue prints, and contrasts greatly with all that has come before.

So why does the Torah devote so much space to this subject? And what meaning does it have for us today? I will endeavor to answer these questions.

You will recall that the Israelites were in the building business for 430 years. But they were building structures as slaves, for their Egyptian masters. This is the first building they do as a free people. And the first building is the structure to “house” their victorious god. This is a good first reason why this subject was important... it was very important and significant to our ancestors.

It must have been important to the Redactors who edited the Torah, probably for historical reasons. The Mishkan was built as a

portable sanctuary because at that time (13th century BCE) our people were in transit, nomadically camping at various sites, on their way to the Promised Land. Later, when they were established in Israel, the Mishkan served as a model for King Solomon's temple, erected in the period of the Monarchy, about 1000 BCE. This was a permanent structure, reflecting the settled character of the Jewish people at that time. Solomon's Temple was destroyed in 586B CE and rebuilt as the Second Temple in about 539 BCE. Enhanced and beautified into a magnificent structure by King Herod in the Roman period, it was utterly destroyed in the Jewish War 68-70 CE. With the rise of Rabbinic Judaism following the Roman conquest, the sacrificial cult was abolished, and prayer in the synagogue was substituted. The synagogue became the central sanctuary, but could be built wherever Jews would congregate in their dispersal and diaspora. The Rabbis even taught the the Jewish home would serve as a MIKDASH M'AT, a miniature sanctuary. Yet the Rabbis made frequent references to our Mishkan and Temple sacrifices, and many such references appear in our liturgy today.

So the sacrifices were historically a very important feature of religious life, not just for our ancestors, but for all Near Eastern people. (I just reread Homer's Odessey, and animal sacrifices and wine libations are described on every other page). Our Torah practically begins with the story of Cain and Abel, who fought over the acceptability of their respective sacrifices. In all the Israelite sacrificial cult extended from the time of the Mishkan until the destruction of the Temple, with a break for the Babylonian exile, for about 1400 years, almost as long as we have gone without them.

I mentioned earlier that this first structure built by the victorious Israelites was a structure to house their victorious God. This was also common practice among Near Eastern peoples, to build a great temple for the people's god. In verse 8, our parashah states,

“And let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.” So the Mishkan became a tangible sacred space, indicating God’s presence. This verse must be read with an earlier narrative in mind. In Parashat B’Shallah, when the Israelites were very thirsty (i.e. dehydrated) and Moshe struck the rock at Horeb producing water, the episode ends with verse 17:7... “The place was named Massa and Meriba (i.e. travail and struggle) because the Israelites quarreled and because they tried the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord present among us or not?’ “

So the presence of the Mishkan answers the question, Is God in our midst? Yes, God dwells in the Mishkan.

I have one last word on the importance of the Mishkan, and its place in the story of the Exodus. There is a conscious thematic parallel between the building of the Mishkan and the story of creation. On two occasions, the holiness of Shabbat is stressed, so that construction work is NOT permitted on the seventh day. That is, the sacredness of time trumps the sacredness of space. When completed, the language is the same as with creation: the work is finished, it is found to be good, the result is blessed. What this means is that Israel is a partner in Creation; imitating it in the Mishkan, and celebrating it on Shabbat.

Now let us turn to a meaningful portion of this reading, directly relevant for today. The name of the parashat is Terumah, meaning “offering”. The text states “ The Lord spoke to Moses saying, tell the Israelite people to bring me gifts, you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him.”

Terumah comes from the root ROM meaning height, i.e. sacrifices were traditionally lifted up. And the act of freely offering a sacred

gift elevates the donor. Note that this Terumah was not a tax, or a command, but rather was an explicit call for freely given resources. As such, this is the archetypal description of Jewish charity; freely given, ennobling the donor, and destined for a sacred purpose. So when we contribute to Temple Emanuel, a Jewish dayschool, CJP, Hadassah, etc. we are furthering the sacred work of building Jewish community. This parashah teaches that our gifts must be freely given, but the act of giving is a holy act, a mitzvah.

This is what is so distressing about the Madoff scandal. Not only were individuals ripped off (the crime is genevah or stealing) but wonderful and venerable Jewish institutions like Hadassah, Yeshiva U, the Elie Weisel Foundation, institutions pledged to do the very sacred work I spoke of, were shamelessly exploited.

Despite this, I remain inspired by the power of Jewish giving , from the time of the Mishkan even until today, to create great Jewish works. For example, we just returned from Israel and witnessed first hand the CJP Boston-Haifa connection, now engaged in the absorption of Ethiopian refugees. What we saw was that our resources were making an impact in the lives of these new Israelis.

As we read this parasha, let us feel as our ancestors felt 2500 years ago, that the divine dwells in our midst, and our freely given contributions, are sacred acts making it so.

Shabbat shalom.

SPK
2-22-09