

Elizabeth Waksman
Dvar Torah – Parashat Terumah
Minyan Maor 2/5/22

Parshat Terumah Davar Torah – Feb. 5, 2022

By Elizabeth Waksman

[Shabbat Shalom.](#)

Any of you who have spent time lately with young kids, or who listen to popular music, must surely be aware of the latest hit song, “We Don’t Talk About Bruno.” For those of you who are NOT in the know, this song is the latest hit from Lin-Manuel Miranda, and is the catchiest of all the many catchy tunes he wrote for the Disney animated film Encanto.

Encanto tells the story of a boisterous and loving multigenerational Colombian family who have rebuilt their lives following a harrowing immigration experience. In a flashback scene at the opening of the film, we watch a mother and father of infant triplets, along with their fellow townspeople, being driven out of their village by men aggressively riding horseback. The community escapes on foot, but at a river crossing, the father seeks to protect his family by standing up to the horsemen, apparently sacrificing himself to stall for time so that the others can escape to freedom. Because this is a Disney film, we don’t witness the patriarch’s fate, but it is clear from the ensuing plot that he was lost. The scene, of course, evokes the harrowing border crossings that we hear about in the news all the time, whether they involve people crossing the border from Mexico into the US, or the countless tragic drownings of African migrants -- all people seeking safety, stability, and a better life for their children.

Coincidentally, we recently read Parashat Beshalach, in which our own ancestors similarly escaped – barely – by crossing a river while being chased aggressively by men on horseback and riding chariots. In both our Exodus story and in the Encanto story, the migration is facilitated by miracles. In one case, miracles from a Deity, and in the other case, miracles from Disney in the form of an enchanted candle that sparks many further gifts for the protagonists’ family. But the parasha this week is not Beshalach, it’s Terumah, so – we move on from these parallel immigration stories.

What you need to know about the song “We Don’t Talk About Bruno” is that the character Bruno is a huge disappointment to his family. Bruno, so the family believes, has weakened the family’s magical gifts. He is a failure. He goes into hiding. The family doesn’t talk about him anymore. The younger family and community members know little about him. He becomes the stuff of whispers and wonderings.

Enough about Bruno for now. Because at this point some of you may be wondering if there’s any Torah in this Dvar Torah. So, here it is, a brief summary of the parasha:

In Terumah, God speaks to Moses, saying:

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דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִקְחוּ־לִי תְרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְבְּנוּ לְבָבוֹ תִקְחוּ אֶת־תְּרוּמָתִי: Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him.

וְזֹאת הַתְּרוּמָה אֲשֶׁר תִקְחוּ מֵאֲתָם זָהָב וְכֶסֶף וְנְחֹשֶׁת: And these are the gifts that you shall accept from them: gold, silver, and copper;

וְתֵבֶלֶת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי וְנֹשֵׂא עֵדִים: blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats' hair;

The list continues with items such as precious stones for the Ephod (breastplate worn by the high priest), oil for the menorah, incense, spices, and so forth. God goes on to say:

וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְתוֹכָם: And let them (the Israelites) make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.

כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מֵרְאֶה אוֹתְךָ אֵת תְּבִנֹת הַמִּשְׁכָּן וְאֵת תְּבִנֹת כָּל־כֵּלָיו וְכֵן תַעֲשׂוּ: {ס} Exactly as I show you—the pattern of the Tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings—so shall you make it.

וְעָשׂוּ אֲרוֹן עֲצֵי שִׁטִּים אֲמָתִים וְחָצִי אַרְבּוֹ וְאַמָּה וְחָצִי רְחִבּוֹ וְאַמָּה וְחָצִי קָמָתוֹ: They shall make an ark of acacia wood, two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high.

וְצִפִּיתָ אוֹתוֹ זָהָב טָהוֹר מִבֵּית וּמִחוּץ וְצִפִּנּוּ וְעָשִׂיתָ עָלָיו זָר זָהָב סָבִיב: Overlay it with pure gold—overlay it inside and out—and make upon it a gold molding round about.

The entire remainder of the parasha deals with the materials and measurements for the building of the Mishkan, the temporary portable temple that was used in the desert and some form of which continued to be used until the building of the Temple in Jerusalem several hundred years later. To be honest, although one can envision the splendor of the Mishkan, especially amidst the harshness of desert living, the parasha is not that interesting to me. It reads like a set of Lego instructions, if we measured things in cubits, with pieces were made of cedar and acacia wood instead of brightly colored plastic bricks. BTW, between my Encanto reference and the Lego reference, if you don't already know my family, here is where I share that we have a 10 year old at home, and you can guess how he's spent a lot of his time during the pandemic.

Anyway, there is one line at the beginning of the parasha that I'd like to highlight, and contrast with this week's Haftarah portion.

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

וַיִּשְׁרָאֵל יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִקְחוּ־לִי תְרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְבְּנוּ לְבָבוֹ תִקְחוּ אֶת־תְּרוּמָתִי: Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him.

This is a lovely line – the idea being that Israelites were to bring gifts for the building of the Mishkan “as their hearts so moved them.” The construction project would be reliant on the generosity of spirit coming from the people. No imposition of a tax, nothing obligatory. This strikes me as part of the holiness of the Mishkan. The communal effort.

Standing in contrast is the haftarah we read today, which describes the process through which King Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem.

וַיַּעַל הַמֶּלֶךְ שְׁלֹמֹה מִס מִכָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְהִי הַמָּס שְׁלֹשִׁים אֶלֶף אִישׁ: King Solomon imposed forced labor on all Israel; the levy came to 30,000 men.

וַיִּשְׁלְחֵם לְבַנוֹנָה עֵשֶׂר־תַּלְפִּים בְּחֹדֶשׁ חֲלִיפוֹת חֹדֶשׁ יִהְיוּ בְּלַבְנוֹן שְׁנַיִם חֳדָשִׁים בְּבֵיתוֹ וְאֲדַנְיָהוּ עַל־הֶמָּס: {ס} He sent them to Lebanon in shifts of 10,000 a month: they would spend one month in Lebanon and two months at home. Adoniram was in charge of the forced labor.

וַיְהִי לְשֹׁלְמֹה שְׁבַע־עָרֵים אֶלֶף נֹשֵׂא סִבָּל וְשִׁמְרָיִם אֶלֶף חֹצֵב בְּהָרִים: Solomon also had 70,000 porters and 80,000 quarriers in the hills,

לְיָד מִשְׁרָיִ הַנֹּצְצִים לְשֹׁלְמֹה אֲשֶׁר עַל־הַמְּלָאכָה שְׁלֹשֶׁת אֲלָפִים וְשָׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת הָרִדִּים בְּעַם הָעֹשִׂים בְּמִלְאכָה: {ס} apart from Solomon’s 3,300 officials who were in charge of the work and supervised the gangs doing the work.

וַיֵּצֵא הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּסְעוּ אַבְנִים גְּדֹלוֹת אַבְנִים יְקֵרוֹת לְיִסֹד הַבַּיִת אַבְנֵי גִזִּית

וַיְהִי בְשָׁמוֹנִים שָׁנָה וָאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה לְצֵאת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ־מִצְרָיִם בְּשָׁנָה הָרְבִיעִית בְּחֹדֶשׁ זִו הוּא הַחֹדֶשׁ: In the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites left the land of Egypt, in the month of Ziv—that is, the second month—in the fourth year of his reign over Israel, Solomon began to build the House of the LORD.

So, why the forced labor? It isn’t as if Solomon lacked the loyalty of the people, or the prosperity. Just before the section about the building of the Temple, we read:

וְשֹׁלְמֹה הָיָה מוֹשֵׁל בְּכָל־הַמְּמַלְכוֹת מִן־הַנָּהָר אֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים וְעַד גְּבוּל מִצְרַיִם מִנְחָה וְעַבְדִּים אֶת־שֹׁלְמֹה כָּל־יְמֵי חַיָּו: {פ}

Solomon’s rule extended over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and the boundary of Egypt. They brought Solomon tribute and were subject to him all his life.

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Solomon's daily provisions consisted of 30 kors of semolina, and 60 kors of [ordinary] flour,

10 fattened oxen, 20 pasture-fed oxen, and 100 sheep and goats, besides deer and gazelles, roebucks and ^aExact meaning of Heb. uncertain. fatted geese.^a

For he controlled the whole region west of the Euphrates—all the kings west of the Euphrates, from Tiphseh to Gaza—and he had peace on all his borders round about.

All the days of Solomon, Judah and Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba dwelt in safety, everyone under his own vine and under his own fig tree.

So: These were peaceful times, economic conditions were good. Solomon's subjects generously paid tribute to the king with gifts of grain, animals, etc. You've got to wonder how the people reacted to the imposition of forced labor to build the magnificent Temple with all its many cubits. To this reader, the process just doesn't feel as holy. It's not a community project. This is no Amish barn-raising.

It makes me feel even worse to read in some prior pesukim that building the Temple was based on an international trade deal that Solomon made with King Hiram up in Lebanon, buying his cedars. Solomon sends word to Hiram:

"Please, then, give orders for cedars to be cut for me in Lebanon. My servants will work with yours, and I will pay you any wages you may ask for your servants; for as you know, there is none among us who knows how to cut timber like the Sidonians."

Super: Solomon is offering any wages Hiram demands for his servants, while his own Israelite people are conscripted labor. Some of our commentators try to explain away the ickiness here by saying things like cutting down the cedars of Lebanon wasn't really hard work but rather Omanut – artistry or skilled craftsmanship. Honestly, the bending over backwards to explain something distasteful in our history makes me feel even worse.

But let me ask you this. When you think about the Temple in Jerusalem, our Beit Hamikdash, where we now weep at the Western Wall – do any of you think about conscripted labor? Do our sages and commentators contrast the building of the Mishkan from Terumat (donations) brought from the heart vs the building of the Holy Temple on the backs of conscripted labor? No, of course not. Why? Because just like in Encanto, we don't talk about Bruno.

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There are events in our shared history that makes us uncomfortable. We tend not to acknowledge them. We don't talk about them. We don't teach about them to our children. We fail to create the space to wrestle with the imperfections of our ancestors, with the controversial actions taken by our leaders, or all the shades of gray sometimes clouding our collective idealism. As another Disney song goes, this one an old timer, we "accentuate the positive, and eliminate the negative."

At the end of Encanto, thanks to the help of a younger relative, Bruno comes out of hiding and – spoiler alert – the family's magic returns. I wonder, if WE were to begin talking about the more disappointing, challenging or difficult parts of our histories, what magic might return to us?

Shabbat Shalom.