

Tetzaveh 2022

Stephen Brown

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My Bar Mitzvah Parashah

Shabbat shalom....

I am dedicating this drash in gratitude to Anita Rabinoff-Goldman.

This shabbat marks the 46th anniversary of my bar mitzvah (not the 47th, the 46th!). It is also the first time I have ever given a d'var on my bar mitzvah parashah - Tetzaveh. One reason is that my synagogue mercifully did not require us to give a drash for our bar mitzvah.

The other reason is that I've never really found anything interesting in it to speak about. We heard our darshan last week (Liz Waksman) admit that she found that parasha (T'rumah) boring (and yet she found a way to give a great drash – yasher koach, Liz!). I've heard from at least one other good friend whose bar mitzvah

parasha was T'rumah and who has always found it utterly boring. I can relate to this completely. For what is there to capture the mind of a 13-year-old - or a 59-year-old – after 4 solid preceding months of compelling narrative. There's no creation story to wrap your head around, no brotherly feuds, no floods, no fathers sending their sons off into the wilderness to die or offering them in sacrifice, no broken-hearted mothers or young lovers alighting from camels, no kniving, incest or sodomy, no slavery, murder, plagues or miracles, no ethical burdens or laws that challenge our virtues, no Moshe, no rebellion, no guilt...

The beloved cantor who taught me as I prepared for my bar mitzvah once tried to engage me in a discussion of the parasha. He asked me what I thought it was about. I told him it had something to do with pomegranates. He basically nodded and moved on to the leyning. I always wondered whether he was disappointed in me and thought it wasn't worth engaging me further. But as I've reflected on it, I wonder whether the reason he didn't try to offer me a different perspective, or probe further, was because he basically agreed.

46 years later, I will admit (as if it isn't readily apparent already), that I am still no Torah scholar. A scholar such as Nehama Leibowitz might commence with a fascinating, multifaceted elucidation of the linguistic twist that differentiates the opening command phrase of last weeks' parasha:⁹

דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיָקָחוּ

"Speak to the children of Israel to bring..."

from the opening command of today's parashah:

וְאַתָּה תִּצְוֶה | אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיָקָחוּ

"You (or thou, thyself) should command the children of Israel to bring...."

Can you imagine if the cantor had thrown that at the 13-year-old me? My eyes would likely still have glazed over, but perhaps (maybe...) it would have presented a small portal for further examination. My cantor might then have continued his erudition, as Nechama Leibowitz did, with an exploration of the second half of the opening passuk, offering an explanation of the deep spiritual significance of the ner tamid, and the context of its counterintuitive reference at the beginning of this parasha, prior to the completion of the tabernacle or to the consecration of the priests. I frankly don't know how receptive I would have been to that discussion at the time of my bar mitzvah, but I will give myself credit and suggest that it might have kindled my interest. Still, my ignorance aside, who can blame me for my continued lack of interest. One commentary on Tetzaveh on Chabad.org is even entitled: "It's OK Not to Be Inspired (Right Now)"[∞]

More recently, a wonderful friend of mine who is a rabbi told me that Tetzaveh was, in fact, his favorite parashah. I explained to him my sense that our time moving through T'rumah and Tetzaveh, after having spent the past 4 months immersed in such gripping human narrative, seemed akin to the Israelites' experience with being adrift in the desert in the aftermath of the dramatic

preceding events. The adrenalin had worn off, and now, just as the Israelites were, we are enduring the boring, prosaic reality of nomadic desert life. My friend, however, frames the experience as not of the weariness of being adrift in the desert, but rather of the mystery and power of being in the presence of God, which is emphasized doubly in two successive verses (Shmot 29:45-46):

וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם לֵאלֹהִים:

I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God. (Shmot 29:45)

And they shall know that I יהוה am their God, who brought them out from the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them....

One commentator writes that this phrase “לְשַׁכְּנֵי בְּתוֹכְכֶם” – “that I might dwell among them” “is a gateway to one of the most fundamental and profound discussions found in theology in general and in Jewish thought in particular: the question of God's presence on earth.”⁶

I can see now how the painstaking details described in Tetzaveh create the requisite conditions permitting God's presence to exist within the human realm, and how that concept might be extrapolated to contemplate the parasha's contemporary relevance: what conditions must we establish to permit the possibility of that presence dwelling among us today, both in terms of our micro-level behaviors and our macro-level behaviors toward the planet itself.

The Chabad.org article I mentioned asserts that "Once you've gone through a legitimate process and come to a good conclusion, sometimes that's really all you need." This echoes the thoughts of another Chabad rabbi I once met (the Chabad of Chautauqua) who, when I asked him how often he felt truly spiritually "in the zone" in his daily Tefilot, responded that he was "batting around .300." But he, too, emphasized the importance of an earnest process – of putting in genuine effort every time. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs wrote similarly about Tetzaveh:

"Much of Judaism must seem to outsiders, and sometimes to insiders also, boring, prosaic, mundane, repetitive, routine, obsessed with details and bereft for

the most part of drama or inspiration. Yet....that is where all sustainable greatness comes from.”[∞]

Perhaps going through concerted motions of chipping away at this parasha, rather than essentially brushing it off, may have led me sooner to its deeper layers, and to regard it as sublime rather than boring. Still, for the non-scholar, and perhaps even a scholar or two, Tetzaveh remains hard to access.

For me, the portal to engaging with it more closely opened this past Yom Kippur at Hebrew College, when I had the opportunity to view Anita’s beautiful “Seeing Torah” quilt exhibit. As many of you know, each panel in the exhibit is a visual representation of a specific parashah. As Anita describes on her website, “each piece is a visual midrash in the tradition of Jewish creative commentary...” As I approached the exhibit on Yom Kippur, one particular panel stood out from afar. I was struck by the beautiful, vibrant colors – shades of gold, blue, purple, and crimson - beaming from the panel. With closer inspection, each element within the piece became increasingly more detailed, revealing an extraordinary array of

internal textures, geometric features, and color patterns that acquired different dimensions depending on the orientation in which you viewed them. And of course, dangling at the bottom, alternating with a series of golden bells, was a row of pomegranates, rich with vitality.

This mesmerizing piece pulled me into Tetzaveh in a new way. It allowed me to see this parashah of mine not as boring, but rather as intricate, beautiful, and vibrant. I now know the gift of feeling an authentic resonance with one's bar mitzvah parasha -one that goes beyond the memories, the effort, and the meaning of the life cycle event, and extends to genuine, self-perpetuating intellectual and emotional connection to the text itself. And for this, I am grateful to Anita. I am also grateful for a deepened insight into how one individual can see beauty and meaning where another does not, and how powerful it can be when that understanding of beauty and meaning is transferred to the one whose eyes have not been previously open to it. This transference is among of the most precious aspects of art, friendship, and community. And it permits me now to say to my 13-year-old self: "Mazel tov, kid, you've gone through a legitimate process, and come to a good conclusion."

Shabbat shalom.....

☞ Nehama Leibowitz, New Studies in Shtmot

∞ https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5390111/jewish/Its-OK-Not-to-Be-Inspired-Right-Now.htm.

§ <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-shemot/parashat-teruma/parashat-teruma-and-let-them-make-me-temple-i-may-dwell>

.∞ <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/tetzaveh/inspiration-perspiration/>