

All are gifts of nature, many of them worked by humans minds and hands using skills that are likewise gifts. None of what is brought to the building project—not the materials, not the skills—is entirely “owned” by the human beings who bring it. All of it comes to them on loan, as it were. They give back from what is given to them.

Today, God needs human partners with the knowledge, skill, determination, and wisdom to save the planet from destruction. We will read in Parashat Vayak-hel that “the whole community of the Israelites” responded to God’s call and participated in construction of the Tabernacle. “And everyone who excelled in ability and everyone whose spirit moved him came . . . Men and women, all whose hearts moved them . . . to bring anything for the work that the Lord, through Moses, had commanded to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to the Lord.” (35: 21-29)

Today, when every single one of us is needed in order to keep the increase in temperature at or below 1.5 degrees Celsius—men and women, scientists and construction workers, rich and poor, heads of state and heads of NGO’s and corporations, in our country and in every country, working alone and working together—the **all-inclusive call and response of the ancient Israelites takes on new and unprecedented importance.**

The construction of the Tabernacle took place immediately after the worship of the Golden Calf. God had threatened to destroy the Israelites because of that sin. They are spared thanks to Moses’s intercession. Their relief and gratitude for life are poured into the gifts they bring. We now stand before, not after, a comparable threat of destruction—this one of our own making. Our resolve will have to be powered by fear as well as gratitude. There is much that each and every one of us can do to stave off the disaster at hand and rebuild the sanctuary we call planet Earth.

This week’s Torah portion ends by telling us that Aaron’s work in the Tabernacle is “most holy to the Lord.” (30:10) The same must be said of our effort to save the Creation after which the Tabernacle is modeled.

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תצוה תשע"ט



## Holy Work for God’s Creation

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*This is the third in a series of commentaries linking Parashat Hashavua, the weekly Torah portion, with parashat hashavua, a Modern Hebrew idiom for the event or story that dominates the week’s news.*

The most important headline of the week (and perhaps the year) did not appear in the top right column of the *New York Times* last Thursday. That spot—traditionally reserved for the lead story—was given over to the troubles facing the governor of Virginia, a scandal likely to be resolved and forgotten in a matter of weeks. Not so the fact that “the five warmest years in recorded history have been the last five, and that 18 of the 19 warmest years have occurred since 2001.” This story is likely to shape human history—and the life of the planet—for many years to come; it now seems indisputable that “the quickly rising temperatures . . . correspond with the scientific consensus that climate change is caused by human activity.” Worse, “what sets recent warming apart in the sweep of geologic time is the relatively sudden rise in temperatures and its clear correlation with increasing levels of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane produced by human activity.”

That link between “the sweep of geologic time” and “human activity” here and now eerily echoes the connection drawn in this week’s Torah portion between the Israelites’ construction of the Tabernacle and God’s creation of heaven and earth. Indeed, the Sages imagined the divine Author of the Torah making that connection explicit. “Rabbi Meir said: ‘The Holy Blessed One said, “The lights that Aaron lights are more cherished by me than the luminaries that I fixed in the heavens.”’ (Tanhuma, Par. Tetzavveh, *siman* 2) We read in the Book of Genesis (2:2-3) that on the seventh day of creation, “God finished the work (*melakhah*) that He had been doing (*asah*), and He ceased on the seventh day from all the work that He had done.” The same words resound in the account (in next week’s portion) of the choice of Bezalel to supervise the construction of the Tabernacle.

“I have endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability and knowledge in every kind of craft (*melakhah*), to make (*la’asot*: from the root *asah*) designs for work in gold, silver and copper....to work (*la’asot*) in every kind of craft (*melakhah*).” (31:3-5)

Lest we miss the crucial verbal link between divine construction of the cosmos and human construction of the tabernacle, a paragraph reminding the Israelites about observance of the Sabbath follows. “Six days may work be done” (*ye’aseh melakhah*) but on the seventh day there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord.” (v. 15)

Why this emphasis on the relation between world and Tabernacle? What can it teach us about the challenge to human ingenuity—and survival—posed in our day by climate change?

Ancient, medieval, and modern commentators on these verses could, of course, not foresee the clear and present danger to God’s world that we face in 2019, a threat caused in large part by God’s human creatures. New conditions demand and elicit new readings of Torah. Several things strike me as I read about the building of the Tabernacle alongside the ongoing and ever-worsening news of climate change.

First: **the sheer exuberance of the Torah’s account of human interaction with glorious, bountiful nature through labor that produces spaces and objects of utility and beauty.** “Make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold.” “As for the Tabernacle, make it of ten strips of cloth; make these of fine twisted linen, of blue, purple and crimson yarns.” “You shall then make cloths of goats’ hair for a tent over the Tabernacle.” “Make five posts of acacia wood for the screen and overlay them with gold—their hooks being of gold—and . . . sockets of copper.” (25:13, 26:31, 7, 37)

In every case, the *act of making*—human workmanship applied to elements of nature, organic or inorganic, produces objects that serve human needs and elevate the human spirit. The level of detail in these chapters is staggering—colors, fabrics, metals, woods, precious stones; carving, etching, hewing, weaving. The symmetry and precision on view—*this* number of cubits here, *that* number there, not more and not less—bears eloquent witness to what my teacher Philip Rieff called “sacred order.” The ritual must be done just this way, at just this time, wearing these garments and no others. The order is precious, life-giving, holy. It builds and maintains worlds.

The accounts and images of climate change tell the exact opposite story: drought here, flood there, unprecedented forest fires and hurricanes, melting

glaciers, a map of the world colored shades of bright red and orange to capture “total change in temperature 1970-2018” (as seen in last week’s Times article). Disorder and destruction are everywhere. Human, animal, and plant life are wantonly extinguished or put at extreme risk. A recent report from the International Panel on Climate Change warns that global warming of 1.5 degrees Celsius—likely to occur “between 2030 and 2052 if [warming] continues to increase at the current rate,” will pose “risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security, and economic growth.” The report takes care not to exaggerate or indulge in generalities. Its order too seeks to be life-giving. To me, that work is holy in the extreme.

That points to a second parallel between the news reports about climate change and the Torah’s account of the building of the Tabernacle. In both cases, routine prose—technical and repetitious—points to horrific danger. The price paid for higher carbon emissions is drought, disease, death. “If the world is to avoid the worst consequences of climate change, global temperatures must not rise by more than two degrees Celsius compared with pre-industrial levels. It appears highly likely, at least from today’s perspective, that that line will be crossed.”

One can almost forget, as one reads the similarly dry accounts in Parashat Tetzavveh about kindled lamps and priestly vestments, that the Tabernacle will be a site of wholesale killing of livestock. The Israelites are never allowed to forget that they are mortal, just like the animals they sacrifice. Someday their lives too will end. The point of sacred order is not to repress this fact but to *contain* it in a realm of higher meaning, not to encourage the sort of nihilism one sometimes hears in connection with climate change—*what does it matter if the earth goes to hell; we’ll all be dead soon enough anyway*—but to insist that life, however short, is infinitely precious, and can be ennobled. God has pronounced this world to be “very good,” and human beings, created in God’s image, have the responsibility to help fulfill that promise, for our generation and all that follow us.

The primary lesson of the Torah’s account of the Tabernacle’s construction, is that **the partnership between God and humanity—mediated in this case by the Children of Israel—is needed to sustain and sanctify the world.** The scientists cited earlier employ “skill, ability and knowledge” related to that with which God endowed Bezalel. There is no belittling of human agency, capacity, or importance in the Torah in order to highlight the greater powers of God. Quite the opposite. “You shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him . . . gold, silver and copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns, . . . acacia wood; oil for lighting, spices . . . lapis lazuli and other stones.” (25:3-7)