

Long before our tradition was preserved in stone or scroll, it was carried through story. The Tanakh is composed of many genres; law, poetry, and genealogy to name a few. But let's be honest: none are as gripping as a good narrative. Our tradition is rich with stories that guide us through life: they humble us when we grow proud, and comfort us when we ache. Woven into every story are values that guide us from one generation to the next. And long after we return to dust and ash, our stories live on in the memories of those who love us.

Some of you may be wondering, "What does storytelling have to do with Parashat Terumah?" After all, this week's parashah appears to be little more than a builder's manual detailing the dimensions, materials, and furnishings of the Mishkan, HaShem's nomadic dwelling place. But it would be a mistake to assume that this is all there is. Embedded within this parashah is part of perhaps the greatest story ever told: a love story between HaShem and the Jewish people.

Once upon a time, in a parsha far far away, HaShem created the universe and all life within it. Humanity was fashioned in the divine image and charged with caring for creation. Yet something is curiously

missing at the end of the creation narrative. In nearly every ancient Near Eastern creation myth, the story concludes with the construction of a temple, a sacred space where the deity comes to dwell. In Egypt, Amun-Ra's temple rises from the primordial hill where he created the universe. In *Enuma Elish*, Marduk defeats Tiamat and establishes his temple in Babylon. Even the Canaanite god Baal, after conquering Yam, builds his temple on Mount Zaphon.

Abraham Joshua Heschel names just how radical this absence truly is. In *The Sabbath*, he writes that “the mythic imagination would expect that once heaven and earth are complete, God would immediately establish a holy place—a mountain, a spring, a sanctuary.” *Yet*, “the Bible does something astonishingly different. Before any sacred space is built, the Torah sanctifies sacred **time**.” Shabbat comes first. It is only later, after covenant, rupture and longing, that HaShem calls for sacred space.

In *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana*, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi teaches in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai that the Torah does not say " להקים

"משכן"—“to establish a *Mishkan*,” but rather "להקים את המשכן"—“to establish **the** *Mishkan*.” For before the *Mishkan* was established, the world was wobbling; once the *Mishkan* was built, the world stood on solid ground.” It is the nearness of the divine presence that gives the world its stability. And those who live without the *Mishkan*, without the imminent residence of HaShem, feel that instability-- that absence-- in their souls.

From the very start of Sefer Shemot, HaShem’s distance is palpable. The Israelites suffer under Pharaoh for a long time before HaShem takes notice. HaShem eventually responds by redeeming the people from Egypt with a mighty hand, but something in the relationship has shifted. Liberation alone is no longer sufficient. Parashat Terumah marks the beginning of a fundamental change in the relationship between HaShem and the people. Like a partner who has been absent for too long, HaShem recognizes that for this relationship to survive, closeness can no longer be postponed.

We say in *Dayeinu* that if Hashem had only taken us out of Egypt, it would have been enough. If HaShem had only revealed HaShem's presence at Sinai, it would have been enough. If HaShem had only given us the Torah, it would have been enough. But HaShem is always willing to give us more. HaShem calls Moses back up the mountain and reveals a vision-- not *only* of law, but of intimacy. Parashat Terumah details the beginning of the healing of this fractured relationship.

HaShem describes a sacred structure and its furnishings, but with one crucial condition: the materials must be taken as תְּרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל-אִישׁ לְבֹרֵךְ יְדָבְרוּ לְפָנָיו. They must be taken “from every person whose heart is moved to give.” As the 12th-century commentator Bekhor Shor notes, the gifts are taken “לא בחזקה” “not by force.” Nothing sacred can be built through coercion.

And then HaShem says:

“וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכְכֶם” — “Let them make for Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.”

Not *upon* them. Not *over* them. *Among* them.

This is not merely a building. It is a home. A place where transcendence becomes *intimate*, where HaShem chooses closeness after centuries of distance. The *Mishkan* is the divine answer to the Israelites' deepest cry—not only for freedom, but for presence. For a God who is willing to stay. The cries that rose from Egypt were not only the anguish of slavery; they were the pleas of a people who felt abandoned by their God. The *Mishkan* is HaShem's response, the fulfillment of a promise stretching back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the closing bracket of a story that began with creation itself.

Creation and Mishkan form an *inclusio*, a literary embrace. As many of our commentators teach, HaShem created the world for the sake of humanity, and now here in Parshat Terumah humanity is invited to create a world for HaShem. In Eden, HaShem and humanity could not remain together. Distance grows. But here, at last, HaShem says: *Build Me a place, and I will dwell with you.*

Creator and creation reunited. If that is not a love story, I don't know what is.

Parashat Terumah challenges us to consider not only what kind of sanctuary HaShem desires, but what kind of partners we are willing to be: those whose hearts are moved, *yidvenu libo*, towards devotion. The *Mishkan* was built not only through obligation, but through generosity of heart, through love freely given. We face that same question today. Will we make space in our lives, through our actions, our commitments, our care for one another, for HaShem to dwell among us? Sacred space is not something we inherit; it is something we build, again and again, through choice. Let us strive to answer HaShem's call, to answer the invitation for intimacy. Let us become a devoted people, whose hearts are moved, whose hands are open, and whose lives become a *Mishkan*, so that holiness may dwell among us.

I have a few special thank-yous to offer. Firstly, a thank you to my wife and best friend, Devorah: words cannot express the depth of my gratitude for your love and companionship. Next, a thank you to Jack,

my Mom and Dad, Grandma and Grandpa, Bubbe and Zeyde, you inspire me to be a little better each day. Thank you Rabbis Marder and Olitzsky for showing me what it takes to build and maintain a community. A deep heartfelt thank you to my classmates, you are the iron that sharpens iron. To my mentor, friend and future colleague, Dr. Sommer, thank you for helping me craft this dvar Torah and always being someone to whom I can ask questions, both academic and spiritual. To my Rebbe, Eliezer Diamond z"l, thank you, without you, I would not be standing here today. And, *l'havdil*, lastly, to all the rabbis, teachers and mentors throughout my life, thank you for your dedication and compassion.

I invite you to rise now for Kaddish d'rabbanan.