



Precious Offerings: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Terumah*

Exodus 25:1-- 27:19

“Gold, silver and copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, goat’s hair; tanned ram skins, dolphin skins and acacia wood.... And let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.” (Exodus 25:1) Within the concise text of the Torah the description of all the ornaments that go into the building of the tabernacle in this week’s portion is lush with detail. The Torah is known to compress entire generations into only a few words but in this portion, Terumah, every interior decorating element of the building of the tabernacle is examined meticulously. Why is there suddenly so much focus on the physical, seemingly mundane details?

Amidst all of this detail, there is something crucial missing. Until this point in the book of Exodus the drama has circled tightly around Moses as he leads the people out of slavery, crosses the Red Sea and receives the Ten Commandments on Mt Sinai. But now when it comes to the building of the Tabernacle, Moses’ thoughts, feelings or opinions are suddenly curiously absent. This section feels like an uncomfortable exception in the desert journey – where is the guiding presence of Moses?

This week’s portion is a taste of the world we live in today. After all, Moses never entered the land with the people and according to Judaism we have never again had such a direct line of communication with God. As Maimonides’, the great 12th century philosopher says: “There never rose again in Israel, one like Moses – a prophet and a true-seer of his vision.”

The absence of clear guidance in this moment in the wilderness in many ways mirrors the experience of being sick. Although we look to wise physicians and care givers who often offer good counsel and deep love, no one can tell us exactly what the course of our illness will be. No person can clearly predict how much we will suffer, what pain will feel like for us, how much mental anguish we can endure, when and if we will recover or even when we will die. In times of illness, most of us long for a Moses, in other words a prophet and a true-seer, to offer certainty and guide us through the wilderness of our journey towards healing.

In the world of this portion, and in our world, we don’t feel the palpable presence of Moses. We are far from the prophet and can’t offer one another easy answers to life’s most troubling questions. But, as this chapter lavishly details, there is something to ameliorate this harsh reality. The opening words of the portion describe the first step of the building of the tabernacle: “The Eternal One spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart moves him. And these are the gifts that you shall accept from them: gold, silver and copper; blue, purple and crimson yarns...’” (Exodus 25:1)

The language of the portion is clear. We can and should bring gifts to build the sanctuary. This is not a commandment or an obligation, but rather something we do when our heart moves us to give. In other words, we can use all our human skills and resources to open heartedly create a world of beauty for each other, as the people of Israel do in lovingly crafting the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle is a sanctuary in the desert – a place of healing during the struggle of the journey. Like the people of Israel, when we are facing illness or caring for someone who is suffering we cannot offer each other or ourselves certainty about God’s will, but we can provide concrete comfort and beauty for the journey.

This portion is detailed and varied in describing the gifts the people bring to construct the tabernacle. Likewise there are so many diverse precious offerings we can offer to bring comfort in the face of an uncertain world: warm bowls of soup, cool ice chips, a calming hand to hold, companionship, privacy, a deep self soothing breath, a phone call, fresh strawberries in season, a soft blanket, deep listening, silence. This portion is a foretaste of the world we live in. A world without the constant presence of Moses where instead of a prophet leading each step, the people are in charge of their own destiny. A world where we cannot give each other black and white certainty, but we can build sanctuaries in our hospital rooms, nursing homes and houses and dedicate them with the full panoply of human creativity in gold, silver and copper; blue, purple, and crimson.

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