



Sacred Impermanence: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Terumah*

Exodus 25:1 – 27:19

This week we are reading the section of the Torah that describes in elaborate detail the construction of the *mishkan*, the sanctuary that travels with the Israelites on their journey.

Terumah gives us precise instructions about the colors and types of jewels, stones, clasps and cloths that are used to build the *mishkan*. The *mishkan* is a temporary structure, a movable tent of sacred impermanence, constructed with painstaking intentionality and detail; it is also a reflection of these qualities as they exist in our own lives—in other words, our mortality, our strength and our limitations, and ultimately, our holiness.

Carry the Ark of Witnessing there, behind the curtain, so that the curtain shall serve you as a partition between the Holy and the Holy of Holies. Place the cover upon the Ark of Witnessing in the Holy of Holies.

(Exodus 26:33-34)

The term Ark of Witnessing (*Aron ha'Edut*) is particularly powerful because having witnesses to the deepest truth of our experience is part of what creates a sense of sacredness.

During challenging times, people often feel exposed or isolated as they journey through loss, illness or change. Sometimes what covers us is a simple curtain or cloth; despite its austerity, even a hospital gown or drape allows us to maintain our dignity and sense of safety.

When we are grieving or healing, it can be challenging to move through the normal routines of life; sometimes we need different boundaries between our regular roles and responsibilities and the imminent, tender feelings and experiences.

That which covers and protects us is as important as what is inside, hence the significance of the “cover” and the “curtain.” As *Terumah* progresses, Moses is instructed to “couple the cloths to one another with the clasps, so that the *Mishkan* becomes one/whole/oneness—*v'hayah ha-mishkan ehad*” (Exodus 26:6).

Mishkan Ehad—the sanctuary of oneness, of unity; How we are connected creates sacred wholeness.

What is it that connects us to one another? Sometimes our connections are formed or deepened through shared experiences of personal loss or sorrow, or living with illness or injury. Other times we form bonds through communal losses such as the ravaging fires in California, racial violence, or the devastating impact of the Covid-19 global pandemic. We are having a collective global experience even as we may be affected differently depending on our physical ability, age, class, geographic location or national origin, race, sexual and/or gender identity.

Jewish ethical teachings emphasize the importance of maintaining human dignity, particularly during times of vulnerability.

One who publicly shames a neighbor is as though that person shed blood...One who whitens a friend's face in public has no share in the world to come.

(Talmud, Baba Metzia 58b-59)

There is a palpable tension in *Parashat Terumah* as we hold a delicate balance between the safety and dignity of boundaries on one hand, and the power of human connection and witnessing on the other hand. This ongoing experience of holding the balance includes both autonomy and interdependence, boundaries and transparency, privacy and vulnerability; we are individuals and we are part of a community.

May we serve as humble witnesses to one another, recognizing our shared experiences of connection with grace and dignity. As we journey together along this path of sacred impermanence, may we feel the presence of God in both hidden and revealed moments.

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