

Weekly Words of Torah

Building a Movement Together: Parshat Terumah

Framing

How do we build a movement to demand the release of hostages cruelly held in Gaza, and to envision how best to establish peace and security for all people in our precious homeland? This week's Torah portion, Terumah, asks the Jewish people to build a movement, in which individuals come forward to contribute their unique talents and materials to the construction of the Mishkan, a sanctuary and dwelling-place for God amongst the people. How can we learn from the Torah's vision of a tremendous national project to ensure that our own such project in this moment remains intimately connected to who we are and what we most aspire to as individuals and a nation, while still reserving a dwelling-place for the Divine presence at its heart?

Access Points

- At the outset of our parsha, God tells Moses to instruct the Israelites to bring gifts to upbuild the Mishkan, saying "you shall accept gifts from every person whose heart impels him." Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky Z"l, also known as the Netivot Shalom or the previous Slonimer Rebbe, imagines this process in moving psychological terms. He says that a heart impels an individual to deliver that which is hardest, most painful and troubling to God. He then declares that "we will build the Mishkan from all those hard parts of life that each member of the Jewish people individually delivers and raises up to God. **"How can we build a nationwide movement that reflects all our rawest, most intense emotions: our pain, our fear, our anger?** How can we take these impossibly difficult parts of our lives and our world, and channel them to the constructive ends of divine justice?"
- Compared to the Slonimer's psychological reading, the nineteenth-century Enlightenment commentator Samuel David Luzzatto, known as the Shadal, has a more political understanding of this verse. In Hebrew, the verse refers to the heart impelling a person to bring gifts, using the Shoshon ג.ד.ב. Later, it will refer to each giver again as ג.ד.ב. - giving of heart (Exodus 35:5). But a ג.ד.ב. is also a dignitary or government representative. The Shadal imagines that while it might have been expected for B'nei Israel to appoint representatives and functionaries to manage the construction of the Mishkan, the people decided to bypass this process, passionately employing their own hearts as dignitaries, and bringing all gifts to Moses directly, without liaison (Exodus 36:3). In building our political movement, we too need to make clear to our democratic representatives all around the world that we unreservedly demand the release of hostages, insisting that they not get in the way of our most intense and heartfelt pleas for our brothers and sisters in captivity. **We must employ direct political pressure, and speak without qualification.**
- The parsha ends with instructions concerning the pegs for the four posts of the tabernacle in order to establish it firmly in the ground. In his vision, the prophet Isaiah also describes the pegs of Israel's national tent, instructing the Israelites to "enlarge the site of your tent, extend the size of your dwelling, do not stint, lengthen the ropes, and drive the pegs firm!" (54:2). Following Isaiah's vision, we as a people must now erect the tent-pegs of this justice movement in such a way that we can both extend our tent while holding fast and firm. We must tell our story to everyone who will listen, demanding justice and freedom, yelling about the blood that is crying out from the ground, and insisting that saving a life is equivalent to saving a world. **We must invite people from all walks of life and all around the world into this movement without diluting our message and while staying true to who we are.**

Call to Action

Be a part of this movement: talk to your neighbor, discuss with your friends, bring it up with co-workers, at family dinners, post on social media, make people productively uncomfortable. Know that you're part of a collective, a national/global constructive Mishkan project to restore God's presence in an otherwise very dark world..

Closing Intention

The Midrash Tanchuma on our parsha imagines God making a radical statement. God says to the angels, "See how much I love all the earthly beings who live below? I even descend and dwell behind a curtain of goats' hair for their sake. As it is said [in our parsha concerning the construction of the Mishkan]: You shall make curtains of goats' hair (Exodus. 26:7). If, out of an intense love of humanity and the Jewish people, the Divine chose to be present in an undignified and gross situation, involving goat's hair, we should also imagine God being present with the hostages in Gaza, wherever they are and in whatever undignified and dark situations they are enduring. It is a small comfort for us know that God is present there, even amidst the horrors they have almost certainly experienced. We both pray and demand for their immediate release, as the necessary first step of a long path to their - and our - healing.