

The Sydney Opera House: Parashat Ki Tissa

The Sydney Opera House, with its modern expressionist design and iconic white shells, is one of the most recognizable buildings in the world. And yet the man who designed it, Danish architect Jorn Utzon, never once laid eyes on his masterpiece once completed, this despite the fact that he died only in 2008 – 35 years after the opera house was finished! You see, almost from the beginning Utzon’s project was beset by controversy and conflict: the engineers butted heads with the architects; the residents of nearby suburb Kiribilli opposed the new construction out of fear that it would mar views and lower property values; escalating costs and power struggles pitted Utzon against the government minister of New South Wales. In 1966, after a denied request regarding a supply of wood became the straw that broke the camel’s back, the architect closed up his office and vowed never to return to Australia again – a promise that he kept until his death. While the Sydney Opera House receives well over 1 million visitors each year, locals and tourists alike who come from all over the globe to marvel at the structure’s magnificent beauty and design, Utzon himself never once saw the glory of his plans fully realized.

It is not at all a given that group building creates a sense of joint unity and purpose; often, in fact, it is quite the opposite. Which is one of the many things that makes the events recounted in this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tissa*, most extraordinary. The third of five *parshiot* at the end of the Book of Exodus all dealing with the building of the Mishkan (Tabernacle), the portable sanctuary used by the Israelites during their period of desert wandering, this entire section of Torah describes in meticulous and often tedious detail instructions for the building of the sacred sanctuary and its accessories: lists of materials; measurements of length, width, and height; blueprints for the placement of holy vessels and utensils; requirements for priestly robes and dress. The sheer scope and specificity of these directions are overwhelming, not to mention the fact that they are repeated over and over again throughout the course of these five final *parshiot*. While the creation of the entire world back in Genesis takes place in just two chapters, the creation of the Mishkan, in contrast, is described in close to 15.

Touring the Sydney Opera House earlier this winter during my sabbatical gave me a bit of new perspective on this part of Torah, one that has often, to me, seemed overly repetitive and fastidious. Architecture, it turns out, *is* incredibly detailed and precise – not only for reasons of structural integrity and safety but also because it represents the vision of a particular artist attempting to convey a point of view and imbue aesthetics, functionality, and symbolism into every pane and brick. Utzon, for example, intentionally chose purple for much of his internal color palette because it's a shade not found on many international flags and thus considered neutral; it's also a sign of royalty (one of the reasons the hue features prominently in the Tabernacle as well). He chose a combination of pure white and off-white tiles for the Opera House's roof so that it would look striking from afar without being too reflective; he also found a "self-washing" material so that cleaning the building could be done naturally through rainfall. Utzon worried not only about how the Opera House would appear from close up and far away, but he even concerned himself with what he called the fifth façade, imagining how his building would look like from aerial view. For an architect pouring all of his imagination and creative energy into a single project, no detail – no matter how small – is ever insignificant.

So how is it that the construction of the Sydney Opera House was so miserable and divisive that it led its chief designer to leave the project before completion whereas the construction of the Tabernacle was so bonding and uplifting that it caused an entire nation of former slaves and *kvetches* to come together as one? Indeed, the building of the Mishkan was characterized by unprecedented participation, generosity, and spirit of goodwill with every member of the community taking part, supply of necessary materials far exceeding demand, men and women willingly turning over their precious jewelry, fabric, gems, and oil for the good of the group as a whole. For the first time in Jewish history (and possibly the only time since!) Moses actually had to tell the Israelites to *stop* bringing gifts, as it says in Exodus 36: "The people are bringing more than is needed for the tasks entailed in the work the Lord has commanded to be done...Let no man or woman make further effort towards gifts for the sanctuary!"

Can you imagine a synagogue president ever saying such a thing during a capital campaign or annual appeal?!? It is utterly unthinkable! Group building projects often fall short of creating a sense of joint unity and purpose, and yet this one did so brilliantly. What made the work of the Mishkan so successful, and what lessons might this have for us today as we think about growing institutions, creating community, and inspiring philanthropy here in our own generation?

The first thing we notice about instructions given for the construction of the Tabernacle is that they balance compulsory and voluntary contributions. Financial support for the Mishkan is made possible through the Torah's famous half-shekel campaign mandating one fixed price for all – the rich expressly forbidden from giving more to the building of the sanctuary and the poor likewise prohibited from giving less. Having each member of the community participate in the same, equal way undoubtedly created a literal sense of buy-in and engagement amongst the Israelites as well as leveling the playing field so that no one could feel more (or less) important and integral to the ultimate success of the project. Seeing how a relatively small donation so quickly grew when amplified by the participation of many was perhaps also a powerful metaphor for the emerging Israelite nation as to what other great things might be accomplished by working together as one.

Yet while the Tabernacle was established and sustained by the half-shekel campaign, donations to the Mishkan did not stop there! Instead, all of Israel was instructed to “bring gifts to the Lord; everyone whose heart so moves him,” the community encouraged to offer up both physical contributions as well as their own unique skills and talent for the building and design of this sacred structure (Exodus 35:5). Mandatory contributions may be important to create a level of minimal investment in an organization's success (not to mention to ensure more reliable planning for an organization's future), but it is often when people are given the opportunity to bring that which they are distinctively poised to bring – their expertise, their passion, their wisdom, their experience – that they develop a true sense of stewardship

and pride for whatever it is that they are helping to build. It is a move from passive involvement to active co-creation!

Typically, the half-shekel campaign and voluntary contributions of the Tabernacle are compared to annual dues and fund-raising in the modern synagogue, but I see the latter much more broadly as being about volunteerism in addition to giving and a particular kind of volunteerism at that, the kind that connects an individual's unique gifts to the needs of the community in a deep and meaningful way. When an educator serves on our Academy board or a lawyer lends her efforts to a congregational contract negotiation, when a home cook puts these energies into making kugel for bereaved families or someone who loves to sing decides to learn Torah *trope* it seems to me a true expression of bringing from one's heart, the kind of bringing that allows individuals to feel a sense of purpose and that leads organizations to thrive. Whether it comes to giving time or giving money, we should perhaps be looking more carefully to help facilitate individuals building that piece of our community that truly stirs their soul. And perhaps we can each leave shul this morning thinking about what piece of ourselves we might bring to further strengthen and enhance our congregation here at BHBE.

Finally, I would like to suggest that the building of the Tabernacle was so successful not only because it balanced mandatory and voluntary contributions and encouraged people to give from their hearts but also because it was directed in a way that kept the ultimate mission and vision of the project top of mind. The Biblical Bezalel is often described as chief artisan for the Mishkan but he is also said to be a man of *hochmah*, *bina*, and *da'at* – wisdom, insight, and knowledge – words that transcend the artistic and seem to portray Bezalel as both smart and savvy. Bezalel, most unusually, is called by the full name of Bezalel ben Uri ben Hur – his lineage tracing back two full generations rather than just to his father as is the custom. According to *midrash*, Bezalel's grandfather, Hur, was killed just before the episode of the Golden Calf in this week's *parasha*– it was actually he, not Aaron, who was initially approached to cast the forbidden mold, and when he refused he was murdered by the Israelite nation. Aaron, as a

result, acquiesced to the people's demands the second time around and Bezalel, we can only imagine, grew up understanding all too well the vast difference that exists between building something beautiful in service of God versus building something beautiful to serve as a god.

I would suggest that it is Bezalel's unique pedigree that led him to keep the ultimate purpose of the Tabernacle always in mind. Knowing that these people, newly freed from years in Egypt surrounded by human men who claimed to be gods and representational imagery of the divine, needed the grace of the Mishkan, God's concession to the people as they grew in spiritual maturity, before they could fully embrace relationship with a deity they could not see – he consistently kept them focused on the two most important tasks at hand: connecting to God and creating community. Many elements of the Tabernacle's design were specifically intended to remind the people that this was a structure meant for the Divine: the sanctuary sparkling with silver, gold, and precious gems; the cherubim above the ark with their angelic wings and faces; the saintly priests with their royal, colored robes. But we can imagine, too, that it took Bezalel's leadership to remind the people that this particular building project was in service of God rather than a glittery end unto itself.

The Chasidic rabbi, Reb Mordecai Yosef Leiner of Izbica, describes the process of building the Mishkan and the fact that in addition to connecting the people to God, this project also helped to create a robust sense of community. He writes: "At first, each skilled individual did his own part of the construction, and it seemed to each one that his own work was extraordinary. Afterward, they saw how their several contributions to the 'service' of the tabernacle were integrated—all the boards, the sockets, the curtains and the loops fit together as if one person had done it all. Then they realized how each of them had depended on the other...they understood that what they had accomplished was not by virtue of their own skill alone, but that the Holy One had guided the hands of everyone who had worked on the Tabernacle. They had merely joined in completing its master building plans...Moreover, the one who had made the holy ark itself was unable to feel superior to the one who had made the courtyard tent

pegs.” Being joined in sacred purpose allowed the Israelites to put aside their individual egos and concerns and come together as a nation united. Voluntary and mandatory giving from one’s heart along with working together in service of the Divine, helped the Jewish people become one.

In the end, there was some amount of reconciliation when it came to Jorn Utzon and the famous building that he designed. In the late 1990’s the Sydney Opera House Trust reached out to secure Utzon’s involvement in future changes to the building, ultimately naming him as a design consultant. In 2004, one of the Opera House’s interior spaces was named in Utzon’s honor and the architect has been decorated with countless awards for the grand project that he never saw completed. Perhaps the story is less tragic than it seems. After all, the building is still standing - the interpersonal trauma related to its birth long since forgotten. Yet for us, as Jews, it is almost exactly the opposite story. Our building, the holy Tabernacle, is long gone. But the community that it birthed – we, the Jewish people – should, God-willing, endure forever.

Shabbat Shalom.