

Parashat Terumah

Sermon February 2023

/Almost heaven, West Virginia

Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River

Life is old here

Older than the trees

Younger than the mountains

Blowin' like the breeze....

Country Rooooooooooads

Take me hooooome

To the place.....I belong...

.....

.....West Virginia!.... /

Yeah! Ok, Maybe John Denver isn't quite your style. How about another set of wisdom from Simon and Garfunkel:

/Homeward bound, I wish I was
Homeward bound...

Home!

Where my thoughts escapin'

Home!

Where my music's playin'

Home!

Where my love lies, waitin'...

Silently for me.../

Or maybe, (and this is the last one for now, I promise), the truth lies in the words of Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros:

“Home..... Home! Home is wherever I’m with you!

Home... home! Home is wherever I’m with you.”

I’m going to guess that by now, most of you have caught on to the similar theme of these three songs. Home!

Throughout history, we have seen societies of all kinds all over the world develop and rise and fall and succeed and fail with a wide variety of dance, food, language, music, and religious belief. But something that is consistent in all

human society is the idea of home— the understanding that we all need to belong somewhere— at times in a physical place, and at times a feeling or concept, where we belong and identify with the core of our being. Whether that concept of home is a single, nuclear family with a white picket fence and 2.5 kids, or the collective, shared responsibilities and joys and challenges of belonging on a kibbutz in Israel, or even if you are Henry David Thoreau, and your idea of home is going away to the woods to live deliberately with nature, still, ALL of us have that same sense, deep down, of where— or with whom— or how— we best belong.

And these homes, no matter how they look or feel, rarely happen by accident. Even if they

develop organically at the outset, the maintenance of a home— the nurturing of the bonds that we hold so dear— takes ongoing effort, and dedication, and love. In an ideal world, parents and elders can gift young children with safe, nurturing spaces that they, in turn will want to share with each other and the next generation. Home is a gift we give to ourselves and to each other.

This ideal of home helps explain why people who are denied a safe, and reliable place to grow and learn and make mistakes are often left feeling incomplete, and can struggle to establish healthy connections with others. Home, in a very basic sense, is a human need.

In this week's parashah, parashat Terumah, we are reminded that this longing for home is also one of the purest ways in which we humans are made in the Divine Image. It turns out that God, too, longs for home, and that God, like each of us, has a specific sense of what that home should be like.

God, in parashat Terumah, instructs Moses to take gifts from our ancestors— precious gifts of gold and copper and silver, fine skins and dyed yarn, oil and spices and gemstones— to take these from everyone whose heart so moves them to give, and then,

וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשִׁכְנִתִּי בְּתוֹכָם:

God says to our ancestors to take these precious items and to start building, to, quote, “Make for me a Mikdash, a place of holiness, so that I can dwell among you.”

Now, by this point in the story, we know that a physical dwelling place for God isn't a requirement for God's existence or ongoing relationship with humans. By the time we get to this part of Exodus, God has spoken to humans via angels, from within a traveling cloud, from a burning-yet-not-burning bush, through miracles both beautiful and terrible, and sometimes directly, or in dreams. God has followed us throughout generations and generations (enumerated in our Torah), guided us, instructed us, argued with us, punished us, and

saved us. Clearly, God does not “need” a home in order to be God, to be our Creator, to be the Source of our lives.

And yet— in this week’s parashah, in the middle of the wilderness, God says, “**וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכְכֶם**.” “Make me a home so I can dwell among you.”

So—why now? Why does God instruct us to build a Mikdash for the Divine to dwell amongst us, precisely at the moment when we ourselves are wandering around in the wilderness without a permanent dwelling place, without a home of our own? Why does God ask for a Mikdash, and why is it worded this way— ‘v’shachanti b’tocham’?

I'm so glad you asked!

For me, there are three main takeaways from the commandment to build a home for the Divine presence, **וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם**, and both have to do with the phrase “v’shachanti b’tocham”, which means, “and I will dwell among all of you.”

The first big takeaway from “v’shachanti b’tocham” is the fact that God did not ask for a solitary home as a place to hide away and be distant from us, as a place that is only Divine—God wanted to belong with us. God’s home is a home of connection and relationship. More than that, God wanted to have a place that all of us had a hand in creating and maintaining. As

much as the Mikdash was God's, it also had to belong to all of us in order for it to fulfill its purpose— God asked for a home that we all helped to build and maintain and nurture, either by donations of materials, or physical work to construct it, or valuables to make it precious, or love and prayer and time and devotion to consecrate it.

The same is true for our places of worship today, like this one— they wouldn't survive without all of us. Perhaps God knew that by making the Mikdash something we all took part in creating, it would be harder for us to abandon it— and each other— down the road.

And that brings me to the second takeaway from “v’shachanti b’tocham”. This takeaway is grammatical— it is simply the fact that “B’tocham” is conjugated in the plural. God wants a home in order to be there amongst ALL of us, not just one of us. God’s Jewish home can never, ever, belong to any one of us. None of us have a monopoly on our connection to the Divine.

In the upcoming issue of the Tablet, I also talk about the concept of home. I talk about the decisions that each of us can make in our private lives to invite Judaism in, and to consciously and intentionally prioritize the practice of our tradition in ways that ensure that

living Jewishly feels like belonging, and feels like home.

And that individual commitment to building a Jewish home, whatever that means to each of us, is so important— but it's not identical to what we're talking about in this week's parashah.

The type of home that God asks of us, and requires of us, in parashat Terumah is one that no single one of us can do on our own. It is a home that can only exist when we are working together, when we are praying together, when we are donating and learning and growing and wrestling together.

The commentator, Haamek Devar, teaches:
מפרש הכתוב היאך יהיו מעשיהם גורמים שיהא ושכנתי
בתוכם. “This Scripture teaches us how it is
OUR ACTIONS, our Maasim, that can cause
God to dwell amongst us.” Without this
personal dedication from each of us, there can
be no Mikdash as God desired it. Without a
personal buy-in from each member of the
community, there can be no place for God to
dwell “b’tocham”.

And that brings me to my final, and perhaps
most important, takeaway from “v’shachanti
b’tocham”, “and I will dwell among all of you.”

And that takeaway is this: that ultimately, it’s not
about the physical building.

Now, that might seem like an odd thing to say, given that so much of our parashah this week (and over the next few weeks) will have to do with the physical specifications of how the Mikdash should be built, and out of what.

And yes, physical holy spaces are important—just look around you!

But... we don't have the Mikdash anymore, and yet— God still dwells among us.

We don't even have the Temple as we used to anymore— but God still dwells among us.

We were expelled, persecuted, scattered into the Diaspora. In this country, Jewish congregations meet in gyms, in empty theatres, in community centers, in libraries— and yet, God still dwells among us.

This is what I mean when I say that ultimately, it's not about a single physical place— it's about the Jewish community, the Jewish home, that we create together wherever we go.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said, “God is not in the buildings— God is in the builders.” And that rings very true to me.

To return briefly to the wisdom of the third song from the beginning of this sermon: /Home....

Home! Home is wherever I'm with you./

That's what God is telling us, in parashat Terumah. God's home, ultimately, is right here, with all of us, no matter what.

And no matter where we are, no matter when we are in history, no matter what bigotry or hate we might face from the outside— no matter if the Temple is demolished, or despicable symbols are spray-painted on our signs and synagogue walls or our windows broken— no matter what, God's home goes beyond any physical location.

WE are God's home, whenever and wherever Jewish community and Jewish values flourish. And it is up to all of us to make sure that that home stays a place that reflects those values, and remains a home where we are proud to invite each other, and God, in.

Shabbat shalom.

God's home is all of us, and it is up to all of us to make it a home full of love.

Shabbat shalom.