

Fill the Seats – Parashat Terumah 5774

Rabbi Michael Safra

Moshe Mykoff's little book of wisdom from Rebbe Nachman of Breslov begins with the following exchange:

Is the chair you're sitting on empty?

"Ridiculous! How can it be?"

You're right, it can't be ... because you're sitting on it.

But it is possible for a person sitting on that chair to feel empty.

Then, the chair is empty – even when occupied.

The exchange is a commentary on a teaching of Rebbe Nachman's one day as he was about to teach in the Study Hall: "When one sits on the chair, one is a *mensch*!"

Rebbe Nachman was born in 1772, and he was a grandson to the founder of Hasidism, Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov. He taught for much of his life in the Ukrainian town of Breslov, which is how he got his name. And he was such a powerful and charismatic teacher that when he died unexpectedly from tuberculosis in 1810, his followers decided not to elect a new leader. They continued to revere him and to live by his teachings.

If you visit the Breslover synagogue in Meah Shearim in Jerusalem – and for those who are joining our congregational trip to Israel this summer, the Breslover synagogue is not on the itinerary; but you can Google "Rebbe Nachman's empty chair" and you will see an exquisite, hand-crafted wooden chair. It was given to Rebbe Nachman by a follower who had worked on that chair for more than six months. Rebbe Nachman loved that chair and, although he only sat in it for 2 years before he died, Rebbe Nachman became associated with that chair.

Fast forward more than 100 years to the Cossack uprisings against Jews in Ukraine in the 1920s. The chair was still in the synagogue and the Hasidim wanted to protect it, so they dismantled the chair and each of them took just a few pieces. Somehow in 1936, the chair escaped the Nazis and made its way to the Land of Israel. In 1959 it was reassembled and refurbished by the Israel Museum; and in 1981 it was restored again and moved to the Breslover Synagogue in Meah She'arim – so the Breslover's had something to revere and the rest of us were left with the question: What is so special about a chair?!?

But there is something about the care and commitment that each individual Hasid took upon himself in order to preserve that special object.

This morning in Parashat Terumah we read about the Mishkan, the travelling sanctuary that was our ancestors carried in pieces and reassembled at each stop in the Wilderness. There are lots of details about exactly how this exquisite structure was to be fashioned – more than 1/3 of the book of Exodus, most of Leviticus and a nice chunk of Numbers are devoted to details about the construction and the various offerings that were to be brought there. And again we have to ask the question: Why were these details so important? What was so special about this building?

We are not the first to ask. Because today is Rosh Hodesh, we did not read the “regular” Haftarah for Terumah, which tells how King Solomon built his Temple in Jerusalem. Instead we read a passage from Isaiah, which begins with a challenge to the whole notion of sacred space: “**כִּי אָמַר הָ' בָּאֵלֶּה שְׁמַיִם כֹּסֵא וְהָאָרֶץ הַדָּם רָגֵל**”, Thus said the Lord: The heaven is My throne / And the earth is My footstool: Where could you [possibly] build a house for Me, / What place could serve as My abode?”

We don’t have a single Temple today. We believe God is everywhere. And yet we have sacred space. Our synagogues are fashioned with features to remind us of those ancient sanctuaries: The Aron Kodesh, the holy ark at the center; the Menorah; the Ner Tamid, the Eternal Light that reminds us of the fire on the altar that was never extinguished; the Shulchan, the reader’s table that hearkens back to the Table that displayed the 12 showbreads. And the question is why? God doesn’t need a home. God shouldn’t care about the beauty of our space.

Of course the Rabbis of our tradition asked the same question, so I want to share quickly three of their answers – why was that space in the Wilderness – and, by extension, why is our space – so important?

The first answer is that the people needed the project itself. The 13th century mystical scholar Rabeinu Bahya ben Asher teaches that God gave the people a job in order to stir up the attribute of *z’rizut*, of rushing to do important things, and to give *kavanah*, to give meaning to the *mitzvoth*, the commandments they had just received.

It’s one thing, Bahya says, to observe the details of the law. But the sanctuary gives us space to focus on the purpose of the laws – to link ourselves to God. The complicated building process enabled the people to work together for a sacred purpose. He quotes a Talmudic passage: If someone says “I didn’t work hard but I have found fulfillment, do not believe him”; If he says “I have worked hard and I didn’t find what I was looking for”, do not believe him. But if he says “*יגעתי ומצאתי*”, I have worked hard and I have found fulfillment, *תאמן*, believe him.”¹

The building project enabled the people to work together to rise from the natural sedentary state of *atzlut*, laziness, towards the active, mystical state of *zrizut* – eagerness for action.

A second idea, offered in the 15th century by Don Isaac Abravanel – who was a court Jew during the Golden Age of Spain before experiencing the catastrophes Inquisition and Expulsion – Abravanel

¹ Bahya ben Asher, Introduction to Parashat Terumah.

taught that the purpose of the Tabernacle was to combat the idea that God had forsaken the earth and decided to reside exclusively in heaven, remote from humanity.²

It's not that God needed a home or that God's Presence could be confined to a single space; God is everywhere. But the sanctuary reminds us that "everywhere" includes right here – on earth, in our lives, in a serious way.

And then the third idea. ... The ancient Rabbis, and also modern scholars make connections between the Tabernacle and Sinai, and the Tabernacle and Creation. Sinai was divided into three spaces: Moses up on top; the *kohanim* and Levites on the mountain; and the Israelites stood at the bottom, *b'tachtit ha-har*. And the Tabernacle was divided between the *Kodesh Kodashim*, the Holy of Holies where only the High Priest was allowed and only once a year; Kodesh, the Holy Place, where the *kohanim* and Levites ministered; and the *azarah*, the court where the rest of the people worshipped. The sanctuary became the physical embodiment of the commandments.

And the links to Creation. ... We read in Genesis, "וַיָּכֹל אֱלֹהִים", On the seventh day God finished the work that He had been doing"; and we read in Exodus "וַיָּכֹל מֹשֶׁה", Moses completed all the work" as he had been commanded. Modern scholars point out that the ancients had many creation stories, and all the others conclude with the regular gods constructing a sanctuary for the head god. The Torah doesn't have that, but it is as if the people were completing Creation or constructing their own microcosm of Creation with their Tabernacle. And we continue that process of continuing creation, perfecting the world, in our own synagogues today.

So let's put the pieces together into a simple message. The sanctuary is a reminder that God lives in and cares about our world. But we the builders are God's agents; we make God's presence a reality through our *z'rizut*, through our eagerness to observe *mitzvot*, our eagerness to perform good deeds, our willingness to work together to create sanctity and perfect the world.

That is our challenge for this Shabbat Terumah. It's the challenge for Mark and Alexis, who will soon join together as bride and groom. It's the challenge for Lindsey and Liam as they celebrate becoming Bat and Bar Mitzvah. It was the challenge for those Breslover Hasidim who safeguarded their little pieces of the rebbe's chair; it was the challenge for our ancestors who carried the parts of the sanctuary to each stop in the Wilderness and for their descendants who built synagogues as symbols of Jewish life and divine presence in every location where they found themselves for thousands of years of wandering. It's the challenge for me as a rabbi and for B'nai Israel as a sacred community. And it is the challenge for every individual who is not sure whether to enter or what they are looking for or how exactly to find it if they are. The challenge is to FILL THE SEATS – in a meaningful way.

² *Etz Hayim Humash*, p. 465.

In the days and weeks ahead, may we who sit in God's sanctuary accept the challenge to learn, to grow, to observe, to support, to do, and to bring about divine blessing in our world. Shabbat shalom.