

KOL SASSON – Parashat T'rumah (25 Adar 5778, 4 February 2023)

Dedicated with thanks to our inspired rabbinic leadership (R. Ari, Hody, Yael) and inspiring members of both Skokie Valley & Kol Sasson congregations for their vigorous pursuit of community by means of mutual caring and giving, practical support, shared sorrow and joy, and bridge building both within our neighborhood borders and beyond.

This week's parashah Terumah, conveying God's instruction for building a sanctuary, has elicited endless discussion in the sources about what this Mishkan was for: Was it a place for God, a place filled with God's presence, or an emptiness to make room for God?--and also about what is meant by God dwelling either in the house or within "them"—the people. There is also much said about Terumah, the offerings of material substance elevated by dedication to godly purposes, and even more on the nature and symbolism of the furnishings, described in vivid detail that ultimately takes up 40% of the book of Exodus/Shemot.

For today, however, I shall concentrate on the role of passionate emotion in defining what building the Mishkan might have been about. In scripture and rabbinic literature—most notably in Shir HaShirim--erotic passion or burning desire has served as allegory for the relation between human and Divine. In Parshat Terumah, the description of the golden cherubim atop the ark cover has given rise to commentary on this theme.

[I. PASSION?]

We may all have experienced passion as a kind of infatuation that draws upon deep sources of (com)passionate energy and intense desire to please or bond with the object of one's desire, and to blend one's intention & very existence with that of the other.

A. Infants and toddlers have innate capacity to form such connection with their caregivers, and Sigmund Freud described his and his schoolmates' infatuation with their teachers as a typical component of adolescent development. The instruction in *Pirkei Avot* to find one's self a mentor suggests that the bond between teacher and learner is essential to transmission and internalizing Torah. The teacher is perceived as a channel to higher wisdom, a conduit to the fiery life force that fuels inspiration, enthusiasm, absorption, and connection to a higher purpose. Indeed, one could speculate that mutuality of loving desire between parent and valued child became the very foundation of the Israelite outlook that distinguished this people from their contemporaries, most notably in Egypt.

B. Speaking personally, I can recall several small events in my life that elicited a frisson of excitement, a premonition of imminent connection to something beyond my experience.

1. 1960 As a child with little synagogue experience, finding my way into an empty sanctuary, gingerly ascending to the forbidden bimah, I daringly uttered a sound that echoed ominously throughout the hall, leaving in its wake a transgressive feeling of trespassing in God's Place, glimpsing secrets, tempting either loving acceptance or angry retribution.
2. 1962 As a college student finally given permission to take lessons on the recently donated harpsichord that eventually became my major instrument, walking out onto the stage of the empty recital hall where it was housed for my first solitary communion with this magnificent instrument, I shyly and expectantly extended a finger to strike a single key--eliciting an overwhelming, rich sound that resonated throughout the silent hall, reverberating over several seconds that seemed like another time dimension, a sound beam granting non-verbal access to a transcendent world. (R. Josh Feigelson described something similar in his new book *Eternal Questions* in his chapter on Beshallah, music, and silence,)
3. 1983? Later, as a young mother introducing the Havdalah ritual to my eager toddler, I ransacked the house looking for something to use as an identifiable spice box, and found a hitherto useless bejeweled silver fish-shaped salt shaker. Reframing this object's purpose transformed it into a beautiful besamim box that instantly acquired an aura of sanctity, an otherworldly glow that illuminated our Havdalah ritual for years to come.
- [4. 1989 On another occasion, as I reached out to turn off my cassette recorder after an engaging parsha shiur in his home, I listened as my Tunisian born Torah teacher of blessed memory, Dr. Paul Raccah, assembled a few students in his tiny home library to daven Ma'ariv, transforming that humble room into a sanctuary worthy of prostrating one's self, so extraordinarily melodious was the unfamiliar nusach to my ears—and so absorbing that I neglected to turn off the recorder.]
5. As a youngster, I was privileged to participate in a concert featuring Sibelius' "Finlandia" for orchestra, which in the final movement included the Finnish national hymn, sung in this performance by 1000 well prepared middle school students. As the conductor turned toward the audience and reached out his baton to cue the childrens' entrance, an overwhelming wall of vocal sound completely inundated us and drowned out any sense of individual voice or volition. Our voices were lifted out

of us completely, becoming one super voice, the words seemingly formed elsewhere far away and channeling through us as the conduits of a profound energy smelting our individual existence into a unity that must have encompassed the heavenly angelic chorus itself.

In each of these instances, the **moment of reaching out was one of desire and fearful anticipation** that one might after all find it possible to touch the infinite. The power of these brief experiences I believe came from a deep, positive yearning for connection coupled with momentary insight and belief in what might come about—the essence of “Ehyeh asher ehyeh”, the name God gave to himself in response to Moses’ inquiry, possibly understood as “I would be what [you perceive Me to] be,” or perhaps “I would become what you can imagine Me to be(come)”?

[II. CHERUBIM Aviva Zornberg]

In her book *The Particulars of Rapture, Reflections on Exodus* (p. 339), Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg envisions the Mishkan as a Place glowing with potential for such encounter, afire with fear and desire, in which to seek and re-evoke peak experience, however fleeting. She focuses her gaze on the two cherubim atop the Ark of the Covenant, and in the following passage captures an erotic quality emanating from them:

“But in the Mishkan the gold [of the cherubim], representing fire [of Sinai & burning bush], motion, infinite transformation, is not the sacred object. Rather, it *frames* the sacred space, the hollow out of which God will speak. The heart of the Mishkan is the *space between* the wings of the cherubim which, from an unbridgeable distance, at opposite ends of the golden Kapporeth (the Cover of the Ark), gaze towards each other, even as they gaze downwards at the Ark. That oblique gaze frames the space between the cherub figures. The faces, half-turned towards each other, half-turned downwards, suggest an intensity, a fear and love of fire. The “shy, oblique gaze” is of two who must “tame” each other. . . who learn to fan the fire, without being consumed, in an intimacy that grows with time.

At the heart of the Mishkan, then, is an emptiness set in fiery gold. From this electric space, framed by the two cherubim and the Ark Cover, God will speak. . . . [Rather than physically embracing, the cherubim are] *separate*, fixed at opposite ends of the Ark Cover. It is their glances that are intertwined. What unites the separate beings in all their radical difference is a possibility of *dibbur*, of language—“I will speak with you there” (25:22).

There, *sham*, between the two, is the site of language. This is the event, the moment of encounter, that the space is all “about”: “I will meet with you there.” . . . The encounter will **not be continual**, a fixity. It will partake of the **flickering, ever-changing, unpredictable quality of fire**. Rashi’s comment on, “I will meet with you,” is “When I arrange a time to speak with you, that is the place I will fix for the meeting. . .”(25:22). **The space between the cherubim will be the potential site for the moments of meeting. . . .**

Zornberg continues: The music, the language that is to issue from “between the cherubim,” ultimately defies human control. The cherubim, representing fire, or wind, represent a dynamism that no medium can figure forth. In the words of Rabbenu Bahya, the erotic imagery is of an unmediated passion (*h-devekuth...b’lo shum emtza’i*). That is, at the heart of the Mishkan, *sham*, there—is an **absence of forms that, directly from the heart of the fire, addresses the problem of the Golden Calf. The golden figures, with the yearning curve of their wings, frame a distance that only language can bridge.** [Zornberg remembers] Walter Benjamin on friendship: “It **does not abolish the distance between human beings but brings that distance to life.** And Blanchot: “The relationship with the other, who is the others, is a transcendent relationship, which means that there is an infinite and, in one way, **insurmountable distance between me and the other who belongs to the other shore. . . .**”

[III. OTHER; OTHER SIDE Ouaknin]

Speaking of “the other shore” brings to mind Marc-Alain **Ouaknin’s perception of the Mishkan as a Place for envisioning another way—a place where a rootless people gains a dialogic perspective [while yearning for connection to the far-away other].**

In his remarkable Passover Haggadah (New York: Assouline, 2001, p. 36), the French philosopher reflects upon words that form a link to a totally different biblical passage, for example the Persian word *karpas* found uniquely in *Megillat Esther*, with its connotations of luxury associated with sumptuous green cloth displayed at the royal celebration. Such intertextuality is a doorway into another context and another imaginary realm. This “passage” from one text to another is the very meaning of the name “Hebrew” (*ivri*), which comes from the root *la’avor*, “to pass.” A Hebrew person is thus a “passer,” one who passes. **For Hebrews, to exist is to become.** They are in a constant becoming, a be-coming that is a future, a to-coming. . . . Hebrew, he asserts, is . . . **a bridge and passage from one cultural universe to another.** Hebrew is the passage from one bank of a river [or sea?] to another. X In Hebrew, the word for “river bank” is *safa*, [lip?] which also means “language.” Passing from one bank to another is to pass from one language to another, translating into an action the fact [of difference, change of context and perspective].

[IV. FROM INDIVIDUALS TO COMMUNITY: DIVERSITY BOUND BY PASSION INTO UNITY? Passion fueling actions of building together. Sacks]

[V. HOME WE BUILD TOGETHER: Ba’it, Mishkan, Temple?]

[VI. ZOHAR’S TEMPLE]

With this in mind, we may ask: **Can there be a Mishkan without any physical building? Merely a charged space with the potential for intimate encounter?**

Is making the building merely a preparatory exercise for recognizing the true “home” of God within the community? **A metaphysical Mishkan or Temple built by G-d, rather than man, is envisioned in a remarkable story from The Zohar that was brought into discussion of Parshat Terumah by my teacher of blessed memory, physicist Dr. Paul Raccah (a Tunisian Jew steeped in the lore of the *Meam Loez* Torah anthology):**

[*The Zohar*, transl. by Maurice Simon & Harry Sperling (London: Soncino, 1934; reprinted 1978), vol. 5, pp. 329-330 [source 220b-221a]. (Cf. another transl, in Rabbi Yitzchok Magriso, *The Torah Anthology MeAm Lo'ez* [Constantinople, 1746], transl. by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan [New York: Maznaim Publishing Corp., 1981], Book 10, “Sin and Reconciliation: The Golden Calf and the Tabernacle,” pp. 253-55 on portion Pekudey.)]

R. Abba said: “I remember a certain thing which I heard from the Sacred Lamp, and which he said in the name of R. Eleazar. One day a certain clever non-Jew came to [Rabbi Eleazar] and said: Old man, old man, I want to ask three questions of you. One is, how can you maintain that another Temple will be built for you, whereas only two were destined to be built, the first and the second? A third and a fourth you will not find mentioned in the Scripture, but it is written (Haggai II, 9), ‘Greater shall be the glory of this latter house than of the first.’ . . . [R. Eleazar] turned his head and wept, saying (Ps. 8:2): “O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth.” How mighty is the power of thy Holy Name, and how beloved are the words of the Torah, since there is nothing at all which cannot be found in the Torah, and there is not a single word of the Torah which does not issue from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed by He. These questions which that wretch put to me I also one day asked Elijah, and he told me that they had been raised in the celestial Academy before the Holy One, blessed be He. The answer given was as follows.

When Israel left Egypt, God desired to make them on earth like ministering angels above, and to build for them a holy house which was to be *brought down from the heaven* of the firmaments, and to plant Israel as a holy shoot after the pattern of the celestial prototype. Thus it is written (Exodus 15:17 [as a prediction at the end of Moses’ song of the sea]), “Thou shalt bring them in and plant them in the mountain of Thine inheritance, the place, O Lord, which Thou hast made for Thee to dwell in”—this refers to the first Temple—“the sanctuary, O Lord, which Thy hands

have established”—this is the second Temple; and *both were to have been the work of the Almighty*.

But as they provoked God in the wilderness, they died there [here Dr. Paul Raccah suggested that the House God had made for them hovered over Moses as he descended the mountain with the first set of tablets of the law—the tablets serving as ketubah, the House as Chuppah for the marriage of people and Torah—but when Moses smashed the tablets, that House was also smashed], and God brought their children into the land, and the house was built by human hands, and therefore it did not endure. In the days of Ezra also on account of their sins they were forced to build it themselves and therefore it did not endure. All this time the first building planned by God had not yet been set up. Now of the future time it is written (Ps. 147:2), “The Lord buildeth Jerusalem”—He and no other. [Hasidic: Jerusalem as symbol of Jewish unity.] **It is for this building that we are waiting, not a human structure which cannot endure.** The Holy One, blessed be He, will send down to us the first House and the second House together, the first in concealment and the second openly. The second will be revealed to show all the world the handiwork of the Holy One, blessed be He, in perfect joy and gladness. The first, which will be concealed, will ascend high over that which is revealed, and all the world will see the clouds of glory surrounding the one which is revealed and enveloping the first one which ascends to the height of the glorious heavens. **It is for that building that we are waiting.**

Even the future city of Jerusalem will not be the work of human hands,¹ all the more so then the Temple, God’s habitation. This work should have been completed when Israel first went forth from Egypt, but it has been deferred to the end of days in the last deliverance.

C. CONCLUSION

Why are we still waiting? And what is that concealed house? Is it the structure created of human bonds of TRUST²—that events ultimately have purpose, and that things will work out eventually if we keep alive our passionate vision of the future we crave? Is it created out of LOYALTY to the Torah’s guiding values? of LOVE fired in the flames of intense human desire for connection both human and Divine, or of the impulse to GIVE joyously and humbly, valuing common good over individual desire?

Can, as Rabbi Sacks³ teaches, the most essential building material of the Mishkan be the gift of impassioned GIVING motivated by one's heart and skill, the opportunity to partner with God in an act of creation that (unlike the golden calf project) fuses human desire, creativity, and skill with God's? or of TERUMAH, elevating our humble offerings by using them--and the salt shaker--for godly purposes, or dedicating them to Divine service?

Or, as **Rav Ari Hart** declared in his moving Dvar Torah last week, is the greatest gift we can offer God simply our broken hearts, symbolized by Rabbi Meir's notion of the "fiery" half shekel (hearing *cessef* as *kassaf*, =desire, longing): In Rav Ari's words, "**A burning coin, a coin on fire--A burning desire**" for God, such that a mere half coin of burning desire can atone for the golden calf? "God wants our longing, God wants our fire.... **Our yearning**—It's the easiest and the hardest thing to give.... But it's so precious. It **might be the one thing that Hashem can't create**, that half shekel of yearning that leaves us incomplete without God."

Such a complex emotional structure capable of drawing God's presence is not built overnight, nor is it a static entity. It is a dynamic state, a process, suited to a God self-identified as "*Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*" [I shall be what I shall be[come?]: a societal structure continually coming into being by means of ongoing, repeated enactment of kindness, compassion, and humble awareness of collective as well as individual need.⁴

We start our building process with the **Family** and the **Minyan**, as microcosms of that elusive Temple-in-the-Air, that transcendent Tabernacle of the [collective] mind. The Shabbat table becomes the altar, the family seated around it united in applying Torah to service and good deeds become the people of Israel. Parents become the high priest and Levite, the children the Israelites; their words of Torah and contributions to the conversation become the tools and materials, their social bonding the glue and pegs, their "ah-ha" moments of inspiration the eternal flame.

[Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, in his essay *U'vikashtem Misham*, vividly describes how listening to his father's lively, interactive parlor Talmud shiurim as a child left him with a past psychological reality which lived on into adulthood in the depths of his soul: "When I sit and study Talmud, I immediately find myself in a group of the wise men of tradition. The relationship between us is personal.... All of [the sages] are in my room sitting around my table. They look at me with love, join with me in conceptualizing, and encourage and strengthen me like a father. Learning Torah is not just a didactic, formal, and technical experience whose purpose is the creation and exchange of ideas. Learning Torah is the intense experience of uniting many generations together, the joining of spirit to spirit, and the connecting of soul to soul. Those who transmit the Torah and those who receive the Torah are invited to meet one another at the same historic juncture."⁵]

The Minyan similarly forms an ordered, rule-governed construct in **time**, in a mental **space** of integrated diversity, a world apart yet contained within the world, a Tabernacle of peace and passion that we hope will spread its tent flaps and radiate its fiery energy out into the rest of the day and week and into the community, till it encompasses the entire communal dynamic, perpetually renewed by continuing acts of chesed (loving kindness), Emunah (loyalty and trust), Anavah (humility), and Tzedek (righteousness and justice), fired by the enthusiasm of loving connection both to humankind and to God, to bring about the coming of the Moshiach, whom we presume finally will be bringing to us that original Temple, the house that God built.

“Yibaneh HaMikdash, ihr Tzion Tamale, ViSham Nashir Shir Chadash, uVirNanah Na’aleh.”

בְּנֵה הַמִּקְדָּשׁ, עִיר צִיּוֹן תִּמְלֵא, וְשָׁם נָשִׁיר שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ וּבִירְנָנָה נִעְלָה.

Let the shrine be restored, Zion refilled, that we may come up there singing a new song!

(From “Tzur mishelo.” Can be found in *B’Kol Echad*, p. 99.)

“May it come about soon, and in our day!”

¹ See R. Heshy Kleinman, *Yearning with Fire* (Mesorah Publ., 2010), p. xiv: “Jerusalem, says R. Chaim Volzhiner, is a name given to the Jewish people united in the quest for perfection. Corresponding to the terrestrial Jerusalem, he explains, there is the celestial Jerusalem that is described in the mystical terms of the Kabbalah as “*Makom knisat hitklalehut neshamot shel Klal Yisrael*.” Here on this earth and ion Heaven above, Jerusalem is the name given to the unifying force within the Jewish people.

God tells the prophet, “Go call out in the ears of Jerusalem.” [That is] Go to the Jewish people when they are united together to strive for perfection, when they deserve to be called collectively by the name Jerusalem. And what is the prophet to say to them? How is he to help them in their common quest for spiritual perfection? He is to remind them of their first steps as a nation. He is to say to them in the Name of God, “I remember for you the care of your youth, the love of your betrothal, when you went after Me into the desert, into a land that was unplanted.”

² R On trust and loyalty, listen to the Daily Meditation Sit offered by R. Rebecca Shisler for Parshat Beshallach, February 3, 2023, on the Institute for Jewish Spirituality’s YouTube channel.

³ R. Jonathan Sacks on Terumah (*Studies in Spirituality*, p. 98) On the gift of giving, see his last paragraph in the essay.

⁴ See the remarkable report by a Chicago teen with a church group visiting an Israeli Kibbutz for the first time. After injuring herself, she marveled at the way Kibbutz residents generously extended themselves to a stranger, driving her to a distant hospital and accompanying her throughout the ordeal. At first she thought it was their religion motivating them, but it became clear during her stay that this particular Kibbutz did not give much consideration to religion. Rather, it was just that they genuinely care about people and one another. [DOCUMENTATION? Tribune religion editor? Pastor Bright Star Church??]

⁵ Thanks to Rabbi Michael Balinsky for this citation. See Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *And From There You Shall Seek: Uvikkashtem Misham*, transl. Naomi Goldblum (KTAV, 2008). Review by Wallace Greene (January 16, 2012, www.jewishbookscouncil.org; Wallace Greene, Ph.D., has held several university appointments, and currently writes and lectures on Jewish and historical subjects.): “*And From There You Shall Seek* is the tenth posthumous volume in the MeOtzar HoRav series. It is a translation of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s Hebrew essay, *UVikkashtem mi-Sham*. Drafted in the 1940’s, this powerful and wide-ranging work was published in Hebrew only in 1978. This is not at all unusual since the Rov was always reviewing and refining everything he wrote and said. Drawing its title from Deuteronomy 4:29--“And from there you shall seek the Lord your God, and you shall find Him if you search for Him with all of your heart and all of your soul”—and framed by the suggestive metaphors of the Song of Songs, the essay charts the individual’s search for God, a quest which culminates in the stage of *devekut*, cleaving to Him. Like much of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s writing, this essay sheds light on the Rov’s personal struggle for communion with God. The Rov felt, ultimately, like a stranger. His genius was such that the loneliness attendant upon it could not be avoided, a fact which caused him no end of emotional anguish, yet gave us the gift of his phenomenal, creative originality. He was both destined and condemned to greatness and its consequences. This sense of loneliness, isolation, and differentness had a number of different sources, all of which reinforced each other. One of them was emotional and began quite early in his life. The Rov poignantly describes his early experiences of fear of the world, of social detachment, his feelings of being mocked and rejected and friendless. The only friend he had was Maimonides and, as he grew older, all the other giants of the Talmudic tradition whom he encountered in his learning. The Rov identifies this as more than imagination and fantasy but as a profound experience.”