

Torah Thoughts Terumah

5780:

For the next four weeks, the Torah will turn its attention to the details of constructing the mishkan, the Tabernacle in which the priests performed their rituals for God.

What do we mean when we say that we build a house for God? The Torah mandates construction of a mishkan; Solomon built the first Temple in Jerusalem and those returning to Canaan from Babylonian exile built the second. Each of these structures was built for the same purpose, as a sanctuary devoted to God. But because we do not believe that God has a physical body, building a structure in which to meet or communicate with God seems counterintuitive. What did they think, and what do we think, goes on in a sacred space?

We gain a few insights from the opening words of this week's parshah. The materials used to build the mishkan were donated. No fixed amount was asked of the people. Moses is told to accept gifts "from every person whose heart so moves him." Then, in describing the function of the mishkan, God says "Let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them," among them, not in it. If we read those two verses together, we can say that when we feel inspired to donate to the construction of a sanctuary, God will then dwell among us.

God does not live in buildings, but God can be found in the spaces we create for the divine through the process of creating them and in the presence of the community that uses them. We feel God's presence by creating a space that God cannot, by definition, inhabit. Oddly, and movingly, God dwells among us when we make a home for God. We feel a relationship to God through the relationships created in the building and use of that space.

Shabbat shalom