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 ASBI Congregation
 Parashat Terumah 5780

Walls and What They Contain

The morning of August 11, 2008, began like any other. Sara, pregnant at the time with Hillel and Akiva, had a routine prenatal exam, and I drove to Princeton to spend the day unpacking boxes in our new home. Our landlords had been required to conduct some upgrades so that our home would pass inspection, this work caused a delay in our move in, and I was eager to unpack our things before the school year, and our new jobs, began.

Shortly after I arrived in Princeton Sara called me from her doctor's office: something was not quite right and the twins would need to be delivered that day.

"Should I come right now and meet you?" I asked. Sara explained that there was a medical need for a six hour delay before the twins could be delivered and I should spend another hour or two unpacking boxes before meeting her in the hospital.

I called our Hillel director who drove over to our home with her secretary so that the three of us could make the most of this very limited time that I would be able to devote to unpacking.

Which boxes would you unpack? Linens? Clothing? Pots pans and dishes?

I decided that I should try to unpack a few of our boxes of sefarim. We had, even then, so many books of Torah scholarship and they occupied so many boxes, I thought it would be the best use of time to put them away. After all, we were moving to Princeton to provide religious guidance and Jewish education to students there. How could we undertake that task until our books were unpacked and our bookshelves were organized?

Needless to say, Sara did not see things in quite the same way and I'm glad that the birth later that afternoon of Akiva and Hillel distracted her from being mad at me. Eleven years later it's all water under the bridge. At least I think so.

This story illustrates a question that hovers over the final parshiot and chapters of Sefer Shemot. What is most important when constructing and furnishing a structure? Is it the walls, or the things that are placed inside the walls?

The parshiot of Terumah and Tetzaveh contain God's commands to build the Mishkan and the parshiot of Vayakhel and Pekudei at the end of Sefer Shemot contain the implementation of that command under the leadership of Betzalel. It can seem repetitive. Even Rashi, whose medieval Torah commentary finds meaning and significance in every verse of the Torah, leaves verse after verse of Vayakhel Pekudei without comment. "I already told you what these words mean," Rashi says, "the first time they appeared in Terumah or Tetzaveh."

But the implementation of the command in Vayakhel-Pekudei is not identical to the command itself as the Torah describes it in Terumah and Tetzaveh; the order in which the mishkan and its furnishings are to be made is seemingly different from the order in which they are made. In Parashat Terumah the Torah instructs

us to build an Ark and other furnishings of the mishkan and only afterwards to build the mishkan itself. When the mishkan is built, the walls are built first, creating the courtyards into which the Ark and other furnishings are placed.

The Talmud, in Berachot 55a (which many of us saw just days ago in the daf yomi cycle), notes the wisdom that Betzalel displayed in the ways that he implemented Moshe's instructions for the Mishkan.

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani said that Rabbi Yonatan said: Bezalel was called by that name on account of his wisdom:

אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמני אמר רבי יונתן: בשעה שאמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: לה אומר לו לבצלאל "עשה לי משכן ארון וכלים". הלה משה והפך ואמר לו: "עשה ארון וכלים ומשכן"

“When the Holy Blessed One said to Moshe: Go say to Bezalel, “Make a mishkan, an ark, and vessels” (see Exodus 31:7–11), Moses went and reversed the order and told Bezalel: “Make an ark, and vessels, and a mishkan” (see Exodus 25–26). Bezalel then responded to Moshe...the standard practice throughout the world is that a person builds a house and only afterward places the furnishings inside the house, and you say to me: Make an ark, and furnishings, and only then make a mishkan. If I do so in the order you have commanded, the furnishings that I make, where shall I put them? Perhaps God told you the following: “Make a mishkan, ark, and vessels” (see Exodus 36). Moses said to Bezalel: Perhaps you were in God's shadow [betzel- El], and you knew precisely what God said. You intuited God's commands just as He stated them, as if you were there.”

Left unsaid in this Talmudic passage, which is quoted by Rashi in his Torah commentary and by many others as well, is an answer to the question of why Moshe deviated from God's commands when he gave instructions to build the mishkan. God said to first build the mishkan's walls and only later to build the items that went inside. Moshe switched the order! And left unsaid is an answer to the question of how precisely did Betzalel intuit that Moshe's original instructions from God must have been different from what had been told to him.

I'll tell you the answer:

Moshe believed that which is most important should be prioritized in time as well. Betzalel knew to create a secure place in order to create a sacred space. Moshe Rabbenu, our teacher Moshe was the quintessential educator and a man of truth par excellence. The telos of the Mishkan, its purpose, was to house the Ark, the depository of the Tablets of the Law, and to be a location for God's communication with Israel. So that is what Moshe spoke about first.

Betzalel knew that sacred spaces needs borders to delineate and differentiate the sacred from the mundane and to provide protection. Where could the Ark be placed if there were no walls marking its location?

The mishkan itself, its construction and its operation, are for the purpose, the Torah tells us:

ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם:

Make a sanctuary for me that I may dwell in your midst.

God does not want a mikdash in which to dwell, God wants the mikdash to facilitate God dwelling among us. This means that the dispute between Betzalel and Moshe about how to prioritize the mishkan's construction has parallels in our communal lives and in our national life today. And, as you may imagine, both Moshe and Betzalel are correct. Nothing of transcendent value can be built until there is a secure and clearly defined space for it to be placed. And, there is no point in building walls to protect a space, if you don't put something inside of transcendent value.

The commitment to protect Jewish life and to ensure its continuity from generation to generation is admirable and it has been necessary. Walls have been erected and a space has been created for our shuls and schools and camps and yeshivot. And now, we need to fill those spaces with an Ark, with an altar, with Torah and Avodah, in order that God's presence can rest in our community.

The commitment to build and defend a Jewish homeland in Eretz Yisrael and to ensure its safety from generation to generation is admirable and it has been necessary. Borders have been defended. A strong state has been built and it flourishes. And now, all who love Israel, need to fill its cities and towns and farms and schools with an Ark and an altar, with Torah and Avodah, in order that God's presence can rest in the Holy Land.

Betzalel understood that a basic structure has to come first and Moshe, ultimately, concedes that is the only reasonable way to build something. But when speaking about the mishkan, Moshe understood that the purpose of the mishkan had to always come first and that which is prioritized in time, is not necessarily prioritized in importance.

If we can pivot from reinforcing our walls towards building an Aron and an altar and filling our lives with Torah and Avodah, then God's presence will indeed rest among us, as God in fact promised would happen.