

Vayakehl, our parsha, is the dream of a perfect community. Moses, glowing with the radiance from his conversation with God, assembles all the Israelites and tells them it is time to build the tabernacle. He lists its many parts and the materials needed. The Israelites immediately disperse and gather the best of all their things — after all, who doesn't want to be known by God as having a “generous spirit”? Quickly, they return. They bring gold and cloth, gemstones and wood, oil and spices, everything that is needed to build the tabernacle. Though Betzalel and Oholiav are appointed to lead the building process, the parsha says that “every person endowed by the Eternal with skill, and everyone who excelled in ability [came] to carry out the task” 36:2. After all those years of slavery and the trauma of escape from Egypt, somehow there was a community of artists and artisans among the Israelites, and everyone came to create.

But as construction of the tabernacle began, donations continued to pour in. For days, and days the Israelites continued to bring materials. So many materials came that the artisans pled with Moses to make them stop: Moses sent messages through the camp to stop the giving!

Imagine if our everyday lives were like this parsha. What if homeless shelters and refugee camps had to turn away meals and household supplies? What if schools and after care programs had more art supplies, more sports gear than they could ever use? What if medical clinics turned away volunteers because they had more staff than there was need? If only we lived in this world.

As I read and re-read this chapter in preparation for tonight's drash, something stood out to me. As a group, the people of Israel *never* speak in this process. There is no moment, like when we received the ten commandments, where the people say: "All that you have spoken we will do!" There is no moment where the Israelites say "We should have stayed in Egypt where there were leeks and onions". How is it, that a people notorious for their complaining and opinions had nothing to say in this whole process? I am struck by silence of the Israelites, given their voice during another time when they collaborated to build something: the golden calf.

Just like in Vayakehl, the Israelites are in the desert. They have fled Egypt and watched Moses ascend Mount Sinai to talk to Hashem. And they wait, and wait, and wait. They start to panic. It feels like Moses has disappeared and all is lost in this strange desert. The people turn to Aaron and ask him, beg him, order him, to make them a god. Aaron obliges. He directs the Israelites to bring their gold jewelry and he melts it into the golden calf. All of the people contribute. They announce a festival to their new god and worship with burnt offerings, meals, and dancing. This project is crowded with the voices of the Israelites -- seeking help, collaborating, worshipping, celebrating.

Yet, their joyous celebration quickly turns bitter: Moses has to talk Hashem out of destroying them all in a rage, and then Moses destroys the 10 commandments in a rage

of his own. Yet his anger is not sated, because then he has the calf ground up and mixed with the drinking water — all the guilty parties are required to drink it. And after all that, Moses leads a murderous purge, killing thousands of the idol worshippers.

The juxtaposition of these two moments is startling. In both cases the Israelites, the future Jewish people, come together to build something to honor God. In both cases participation is universal and enthusiastic. In both cases the final product is a piece of art, for lack of a better word. Yet, the outcomes could not be more different. The response to the golden calf is rage, shame, and death. The response to the building of the tabernacle is God coming to live amongst the people.

Yet, for all their similarities, these moments have clear differences. In Vayakel, the people respond enthusiastically to a directive from above. In the other, they follow fear and panic into a giant mistake. Hashem is there to show the people what is right and what is wrong. The consequences are clear, as are the outcomes. (As far as I know, no one made a second try a building idols to represent our God.)

But, in the absence of a divinely ordained leader, how do we know which of our actions builds a space for the sacred in the world, and which increases the chaos? In this time of reflection, is our work to ask these questions. Which of our choices are on the mark, and which ones miss? How do we know? In today's world, sometimes it is hard to know. Our actions ripple across the country, and across the world. When I buy

my vegetables from Maryland and my fruit from Ecuador, my car from Korea and my clothes from California, what do I know about how the workers are treated? About my environmental impact? What is the right way to treat strangers and friends? Does it matter how I talk to the person when I order my coffee? How quickly I respond to the call or text of a hurting friend?

I wish I could say I always did the right thing. I wish I could say I always knew what the right thing was. But the truth is, sometimes I make mistakes. Sometimes we all make mistakes. In moments of fear, our patience runs out. We run from the frightening strangeness of the divine to our familiar idols. We have run from choices we thought were too risky, too scary, too difficult. We have chosen to do things as we've always done them, even when we could make better choices. Why? Because of fear.

Some days it seems like fear is everywhere: the murders of African Americans like Terence Crutcher by police; murders of transgender women, like Crystal Edmonds from Baltimore, was shot and left for dead with no clues as to why. The threat of global terror seems imminent, and our country is seriously discussing barring Muslims, a whole class of people, from entry. Fear is powerful and pervasive.

We must face our fears. As individuals. As a community. As a country. We must transmute our fear of the other and our fear of loss into the fear of not becoming our best selves. These are the days of awe -- Yamim Noraim. For this brief window we turn

our back on fear. Instead, we look for inspiration in the divine. We seek out the places in our hearts where generosity lives without reservation. When we are cramped in terror that generous place can be hard to find. As our liturgy says, quoting Rabbi Rami Shapiro, “We bend the knee and shake off the stiffness that keeps us from the subtle graces of Life and the supple gestures of Love. With reverence and thanksgiving, we accept our destiny and set for ourselves the task of redemption.”

In these Yamim Noraim, we focus on a special kind of redemption. It is the redemption found in meaningful reflection. It is the redemption found in trying to correct our mistakes. In your examination and action, I hope you glimpse the sacred, the divine. I hope, that in that glimpse, you can see a world defined by overwhelming generosity: the world of Vayakel and the building of the tabernacle. As we make tsheuvah, and seek forgiveness from God and others, I hope it moves us toward that world -- one full of generosity, life, and love.