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Kol Rinah  
Parashat Terumah  
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Who here has ever had to move? Why did you have to move?

Has anyone ever had to move to avoid arrest? (You don't have to answer that.)

Has anyone ever moved because a law changed making you suddenly subject to arrest for something that previously had been legal?

You may have heard that there are a variety of bills that have been introduced in the Missouri State Legislature that target trans kids in different ways. The worst of them, which has not been passed out of committee, would criminalize parents who provide gender-affirming medical care to their children. Another version did pass out of committee, and this criminalization piece could still be added as an amendment.

These are the kinds of bills that, if they were targeting Jews, would have rabbis preaching aliya. They're real, and they're scary. I hope that we'll be able to hear at another time in more detail about this legislation, and efforts to stop it, and what we can do.

With this swirling, in the world, and in my brain, these last weeks, I want to offer a reading of an element of this week's parashah that speaks about kids, gender, Torah, and truth. It was inspired by Rabbi David Ingber's teaching Monday morning at Song Leader Boot Camp.

In this week's parasha, we have the most specific details about where God can be found with regularity, with certainty. God says build a Mishkan, a tabernacle, ושכנתי בתוכם, "And I will dwell among them," but that's kind of vague. A few verses later, God gets much more specific and says,

וַעֲשִׂיתָ שְׁנַיִם כְּרֻבִים זָהָב מְקֻשָּׁה תַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם מִשְׁנֵי קְצוֹת הַכַּפֹּרֶת:

Make two cherubim of gold—make them of hammered work—at the two ends of the cover.

וַעֲשֶׂה כְרוֹב אֶחָד מִקְצֵה מִזֶּה וְכְרוֹב אֶחָד מִקְצֵה מִזֶּה מִן־הַכַּפֹּרֶת תַעֲשֶׂהוּ אֶת־הַכְּרֻבִים עַל־שְׁנֵי קְצוֹתָיו:

Make one cherub at one end and the other cherub at the other end; of one piece with the cover shall you make the cherubim at its two ends.

וְהָיוּ הַכְּרֻבִים פְּרָשָׁי כְנָפִים לְמַעַל סִכְיָם בְּכַנְפֵיהֶם עַל־הַכַּפֹּרֶת וּפְנֵיהֶם אִישׁ אֶל־אַחִיו אֶל־הַכַּפֹּרֶת יִהְיוּ פְנֵי הַכְּרֻבִים:

The cherubim shall have their wings spread out above, shielding the cover with their wings. Their face one to another, the faces of the cherubim being turned toward the cover.

וְנָתַתָּ אֶת־הַכַּפֹּרֶת עַל־הָאָרֶן מִלְּמַעַלָּה וְאֶל־הָאָרֶן תִּתֵּן אֶת־הָעֵדוּת אֲשֶׁר אָתָּן אֵלַיךְ:

Place the cover on top of the Ark, after depositing inside the Ark the Pact that I will give you.

וּבִוּעֵדָתִי לָךְ שֵׁם וְדַבַּרְתִּי אִתְּךָ מֵעַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת מִבֵּין שְׁנֵי הַכְּרֻבִים אֲשֶׁר עַל־הָאָרֶן הָעֵדוּת אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֶצְוֶה אוֹתָךְ אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: {פ}

There I will meet with you, and I will impart to you—from above the cover, from between the two cherubim that are on top of the Ark of the Pact—all that I will command you concerning the Israelite people.

(Ex. 25:18-22)

This might be shocking. As Aviva Zornberg points out—“human figures inhabit the Holy of Holies, figures fashioned of gold. This seems embarrassingly close to the language of paganism,” she observes (*The Particulars of Rapture*, p. 339). Especially just a few chapters after the Ten Commandments told us not to make a *pesel*, a sculptured image, of what’s in heaven. ...לא תעשה לך פסל אשר בשמים ממעל ואשר בארץ מתחת.

The keruvim were made not to bow down to though, but to frame space, sacred space. God will speak to Moses from the space between the faces of the cherubim.

This is to say, God’s voice will come when people look at each other, deeply, around Torah—they are turned partially to Torah, but also turned toward each other. It’s this intersection of two people and Torah—sacred teaching, law, narrative, tradition—it’s not one person, or just two people, but two people and the ark that has the Covenant—the Torah in it—that’s where and how and when the most profound truths that come from beyond us, from between us, emerge. In this place, God will שם, נועדתי לך, meet us there.

But what the heck is cherub? Rashi, quoting the the gemara in Sukkah 5b, says דמות להם פרצוף תינוק להם, they had the likeness of a child’s face.

These were children’s faces, the original “babyfaces.” What’s the significance of these being the faces of children?

The implication is that a teacher of Torah should be as innocent and free of sin as a child, says another Torah commentator, the Keli Yakar.

There’s an oddity in the verse though that opens up even more interpretive possibilities. שני כרובים—Make two kruvim. Usually we’d use the construct form of two—שני כרובים. Why “shnaim?” The Talmud explains that שני means things that are the same. שני שיעירים—two goats, שני לוחות, two tablets. But here the cherubim are not the same—they are different from each other, זכר ונקבה, says Rabbeinu Bachya—male and female.

For a long time in our culture, the presumption has been that a child coming into the world will be either male or female, a boy or a girl. And we typically assign sex at birth. We ask, are you having a boy or a girl? When someone gives birth, we frequently ask, what did they have?

But this commandment about making the kruvim is just that—a blueprint, for what’s supposed to happen. We have two parshiyot about that. But then in Ex. 37 we have the actual description of what’s made. And there, it’s not שני כרובים, but rather שני כרובים—as if to say in the actual making, they have become similar, even despite perhaps being assigned different sexes when conceived.

These childlike keruvim, when made, have no gender—and/or they certainly don’t conform to our human gender binaries.

But even deeper, whatever gender they have or don’t have or we thought they would have becomes irrelevant, or really, we realize has always been irrelevant, when they actually

come into the world and we are confronted with the miracle of life, of children—of angels. Their own identity will emerge, and we stop defining it externally.

So too, the Torah eventually lets the keruvim have the dignity of existing on their own terms, without us needing to define successfully or precisely what they are. And by the way, while the Talmud and Rashi say they are like children, literally, cherubic, scholars have lots of guesses of what keruvim looked like, winged, sphinxes, and more. We don't need externally to define what they are.

Good parenting means guiding kids, but also letting who they are and want to become emerge, and helping them to become the best versions of themselves, without predetermining what that will be, and allowing for change and evolution in that.

That's what we want for all our kids, and our trans kids too.

Where is God? God speaks from between these innocent kids and the law, from between the keruvim and the aron ha-edut, the ark of the covenant. But we only hear it if we are not cynical, not motivated by our own greatness, our own gains, but strive to be innocent, pure, holy like these keruvim, if we strive to be people trying to become the best versions of ourselves.

The stories I'm hearing (secondhand, so I can't tell you for sure or personally) about conversations with legislators though are either stories of people being appallingly cowardly, or disgustingly disingenuous. Legislators are pushing these laws not because of any sincere belief, or because of any real danger or threat, but because they think it's good politics for them. It isn't sincere care about children's welfare, but rather supreme disregard for their welfare.

Or they recognize these bills are bad, and they care, but not enough to vote against them, and are worried about the political fallout of voting for children's welfare. That's discouraging—lacking courage.

The move from שנים כרובים, a boy and girl, cherub, to just cherubim—happens in the Torah, and it is from between the cherubim for whom gender is not the most important characteristic that God's continuous, prophetic voice emerges.

So much of Judaism, of religion, has been rooted in traditional, static, binary notions of gender. Why has prophesy ceased? Maybe because we can't listen, can't see, can't exist beyond the assigned gender binary. But maybe, just maybe, when we stop seeing gender as determinative, maybe, God's voice will reemerge.

A Mishkan, is, as Rabbi David Ingber puts it, is a place of Yes-כן—ken—yes! A place where everyone brings their unique gifts. We need to make our community, our state, please, God, our world, a mishkan—a place of yes, a place of bringing gifts, a place of becoming who we are, where God's voice will emanate from between people's loving, genuine, sincere interactions with each other and with Torah in the largest sense.

From between the keruvim, there will God meet us.