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Kol Rinah  
Parashat Terumah  
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## Jewish Construction

The Mishkan is, I think, the quintessentially Jewish construction project. Why?

A few obvious answers suggest themselves—it's constructed by Jews, so it's Jewish. It's for Jewish worship, meant to mediate the Israelites' relationship with God, which makes it pretty Jewish.

The quintessentially Jewish attributes of the Mishkan I want to focus on today are its construction by donated labor using donated materials, its impermanence, and its construction materials.

Our parasha, which introduces the Mishkan building project, starts with God telling Moses to ask the Israelite people to bring gifts (Ex. 25:2). Later (in Parashat Vayakhel), artisans are invited to come and offer their talents. Particular materials and skills are requested, but no one is required to give. And people had to bring their gifts, and themselves—no one went door to door to ask or collect.<sup>1</sup> Your heart really had to move you.

We as a synagogue, and as a Jewish community, maybe do a bit more asking and nudging people to give, but we still fundraise for building projects by soliciting philanthropy and generosity, as well as asking people to help who have particular skills, whether in interior design, architecture, construction or project management.

And in general, Jewish community operates based on donations, not fees or taxes. And with that generosity, we accomplish amazing, sacred projects.

Second, let's talk about the Mishkan's impermanence. The Mishkan is much more pack-and-play than crib, much more tent than temple. While I often describe it as "the portable temple the Israelites used while wandering in the desert," the Mishkan had a long life and history after forty years wandering in the wilderness. According to one Talmudic calculation, the Mishkan existed for 440 years, from the time it was constructed until the building of the first Temple.<sup>2</sup> It stilled moved periodically though, from Gilgal during the period of the conquest of Canaan, to Shiloh during the period of the Judges (350 years, say some). The end of its history is a bit questionable, but regardless, it was always an impermanent solution, a moveable place.

There's something quintessentially Jewish about this too. As rooted as Jewish communities have been in various places, whether Israel, Babylonia, Spain, France, Germany, Eastern Europe, Iran, Iraq, Yemen, so far everywhere we've lived has been temporary, impermanent. We may love our buildings, this one and others, but Jews have left behind a lot of synagogue buildings.

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<sup>1</sup> Abarbanel on Ex. 35:5.

<sup>2</sup> See Zevachim 118b and [https://www.ou.org/holidays/the\\_mishkan\\_in\\_eretz\\_yisrael/](https://www.ou.org/holidays/the_mishkan_in_eretz_yisrael/).

I'm not suggesting that we're going to need to leave St. Louis, Missouri, or the United States, anytime soon, or ever. We may need to leave the planet before we need to leave America.

But our history is one of temporary permanence, of being settled for periods of time, sometimes centuries, only to move or migrate, rarely by choice, or if by choice, because that in Russia in the early 1900s or in 1938 in Germany, leaving was the best choice.

After October 7, some Jews of course are again refugees, wandering again. It's enormously difficult to plan trips to Israel and conferences in Israel now because all the hotels are filled with refugees from the "Gaza Envelope," the area surrounding Gaza, and from the North. I've seen estimates of 150,000 Israelis having had to leave their homes.

And as we talk about Jewish refugees, we, I, cannot ignore the humanitarian crisis of the 1.9 million Gazans who have been displaced, their homes often damaged or destroyed. Whether justified or necessary, many Gazan families are at least twice-displaced now—from the places they lived before 1947 and 1948, often in what is now the State of Israel, and now from their homes in Gaza. Just as we understand yearning to return home, we understand their yearning to return to the homes that they knew, that are probably gone, and we hope they will find what we have found—a sense of being safely and secured settled.

We hope too that Israeli refugees will be able to return to their homes, but we know too that not all of them will have homes they can safely go back to, homes they can emotionally return to. May they too soon have a sense of being safely and securely settled, again.

The last quintessentially Jewish quality of the Mishkan I want to think about is its building materials. Joyce Olshan taught today about eternal curiosity of the dolphin skins—where did they get dolphin skins in desert? There are lots of midrashic answers.

But the dolphin skins are really just the tip of the iceberg. Where did all of the various materials used to build the Mishkan come from? All the precious metals, jewels, dyed yarn and linen, skins, oil, spices, and acacia wood?

Each of these products has generated midrashim, legends, that explain why the Israelites just happened to have them available. The precious metals, for example, were taken from Egyptians upon leaving Egypt, the Torah tells us. All these goods are fairly portable, except for the acacia wood—how did it come to be that the Israelites had long wood boards in the wilderness?

Maybe they were just growing in the wild and they cut them down and used them. But the midrash (Tanchuma Terumah 9, and quoted by Rashi on Ex. 26:15) says that Jacob brought acacia from Israel, planted them in Egypt, and then on his deathbed told his children to bring them to build the Mishkan when they left Egypt.

Even in all their wandering, the foundation (ok, the wooden frames) of the Mishkan—the backbone?—was from trees whose roots (excuse the pun) were in Israel. The original home and final destination were along for the entire journey.

Maybe you or someone you know have candlesticks or a chanukiya from "the old country," a portable item or two that made the journey to this country more than a century ago, and that continue to anchor you every Shabbat, every Hanukkah, giving light and hope, rooting you to a past you can't yourself remember.

Imagine wandering in the wilderness, or even living in Canaan, in the time of the Judges, knowing that those wooden tent poles were planted by Jacob in a prior age.

Building Jewish buildings out of repurposed, old and precious items is a really Jewish thing to do. Our own Kol Rinah synagogue building is such a wonderful example of that. Buildings in the land of Israel are so often constructed from materials that were used in other, now destroyed buildings. It's been done to us—one midrash says that vessels from the Temple were used by Achashverosh for his bacchanalia, thus leading to the custom of reciting a few words from Esther 1:7 (וּכְלִים מִכְלִים שׁוֹנִים) in the mournful trope of Lamentations.

And Jewish Israelis built in 1948 and afterwards using materials from abandoned Palestinian homes.<sup>3</sup>

It's an environmentally friendly way of building, and cheaper too, to reuse materials. And it introduces deep complexity into our buildings, to have old materials, from other peoples, from other congregations, from other places. To have gold from Egyptians in the Mishkan—it's a complicated statement. And there was a huge debate in Israel in the early 1950s about whether to accept reparations from Germany. The decision eventually was to accept them, and Israel, is built, to some extent, on Nazi money—how's that for complexity?

In all of its complexity—its being a product of donated materials and labor, its permanent impermanence, and its complicated use and reuse of construction materials, the Mishkan is the quintessential Jewish building.

May we be people who donate our time, treasure and skills generously to holy projects.

May we be as safely settled as we can be, and help others to be safely settled too, even amidst the impermanence that is our time on this earth.

And may we be grateful for all the old things that grace our buildings, reminding us of all those who labored before us.

And may we have a spark of Jacob's prophecy, to create the materials future generations will build with.

Shabbat shalom.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/02/01/magazine/israel-founding-palestinian-conflict.html> , part v.