

Rabbi Rheins Weekly Message of Torah: Parashat Terumah

There's A Place For Us

The Book of Exodus which heretofore has detailed the enslavement and redemption of our ancestors from Egypt and then the revelation at Sinai now turns to the intricate instructions concerning the building of the Tabernacle, its holy objects, and the sacrifices which are to be offered to God. The highlight in this week's Torah portion is:

V'asu li mikdash v'shakhanti b'tokham

And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them

(Exodus 25:8)

Since we have had a place of worship for well over three thousand years, we might think that it is only natural that our ancestors were instructed to build a sacred space. From the Tabernacle in the wilderness to the Temple in Jerusalem to the synagogues in which we pray to this day, our people have seemingly always had a place to worship.

And yet, note that none of the Patriarchs built a sanctuary. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob worshipped God in any number of places and made sacred offerings to God, but they did not always do so in an exclusively designated place. Jacob actually promised to build a House of God, but he ended up building only an altar and not a Temple. And at the end of last week's Torah portion, Moshe gathers the elders for a covenant ceremony---he sets up 12 pillars to represent the tribes of Israel, builds an altar, but does not erect a Temple or Tabernacle.

An altar, open to the sky, around which all who are interested may gather, seems to be more in keeping with the Jewish sense of God who is one with all existence and not confined to a single place. *Melo khol haAretz kvodo* "The whole earth is filled with God's glory."

Indeed, one of the ways we refer to God is by the name *Makom*, literally "the Place." That is, all places are of God." Therefore, why does God command of us to build a sanctuary? According to various midrashim, including those found in the classic collections of *Shemot Rabbah* and *Tanchuma*, Israel was commanded to build the Sanctuary only after the disaster of the Golden Calf. The commentators speculate that the dwelling place of God (i.e. the Sanctuary) would help to prevent future temptations to build a Golden Calf.

The problem with this explanation is that the story of the Golden Calf comes later in the Torah than the instruction to build the sanctuary. We won't read about the sin of idolatry and the Golden Calf for another few weeks when we reach Exodus chapter 32 of the Torah. This week we are still in chapters 25 thru 27 of Exodus.

So how could the instruction of the sanctuary have anything to do with the Golden Calf incident? The great medieval commentator Rashi (Rabbi Shimon ben Levi of France and Germany in the 11th century) simply stated the classic position *Ain lifni o achar b'Torah*, there is no before or after in Torah. Meaning, that the Torah is not written in chronological order.

As you can imagine, there are creative commentaries that attempt to explain why the instruction for the Tabernacle came before the apostasy of the Golden Calf. Most interesting is the idea that “God always provides an antidote before the disease.” Knowing that humans will always be tempted to build false gods of their own, idols that we can manipulate in order to support our vanity and ego, God instructed our ancestors to create a reminder that God dwells in their midst (*b'tokham*).

And so it is for us. Let us consider again God's commandment: “*V'asu li mikdash v'shakhanti b'tokham*, Build Me a tabernacle and I will dwell in your midst.” Yes, God is everywhere. Still, it is when we come together that we support one another and collectively reinforce our commitment to the sacred all around us. Alone and left to our own devices, we make false gods and elevate our personal agendas to the detriment of others. But when we come together we see the Divine in others. When we come to an honored sacred space like a synagogue we are reminded that we are a part of the continuum of the *brit*, the covenant that united our ancestors and helped us persevere and thrive in every generation. When we see our friends and loved ones worshiping together in the synagogue, we celebrate the fact that God truly does dwell among us.

Shabbat Shalom!

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