

A Year of Encompassing Torah



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Parashat Terumah

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This is how we shall accrue our mitzvah points:

**Barukh atah Adonai,
Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam,
Asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah...**

**Praised are You Adonai, our God,
The Sovereign of all worlds,
Who has made us holy with your mitzvot,
And commanded us to engage ourselves
with words of torah.**

***To be fully engaged with Torah
Is to wrestle with Torah –
To challenge our tradition while loving it,
To question it while celebrating it.***

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**An Added Blessing
For Spiritual Direction**

*"Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'higion libi
lifaneycha Hashem Tzuri v'Go'ali*

May the expressions of my mouth
and **the thoughts of my heart**
find favor before You, G-d,
my Rock and my Redeemer."

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The Back Cover

*"V'asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham...
Let them build Me a holy place that I may dwell
in them."*

Building sacred space for God
Allows God to enter the people,
His real dwelling place.

Victor Hugo recognized the capacity of the heart
To act as God's dwelling place:
"There is one spectacle grander than the sea,
That is the sky;
There is one spectacle grander than the sky,
That is the interior of the soul."

There once was a masterful teacher.
No one had ever surpassed the depth, variety
and enticing quality of his wisdom.
His students frequently inquired about the
source
from which he drew this inexhaustible store of
sagacity.

He told them that is wall written in a book
that they would inherit after he was dead.
The day after his death, the disciples found the
book
exactly where he told them it would be,
but there was but one page in the book,
And but one sentence on the page.
It read: *"Understand the difference
between the container and the content
and the fountain of wisdom will open before your
eyes."*

When we engage in the sacred task
of constructing willing hearts of gold,
God draws closer and dwells in them.
Thus, we become vessels for God's presence.

**Rabbi Stephen Pearce
Temple Emanu-El, San Francisco, CA**

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Parashat Terumah 5768

In his instructions to the Israelite nation, following their acceptance of the Covenant with God, Moses instructs the people to contribute from the heart to the building of the Mishkan in the wilderness. The purpose of such a construction project was to initially house the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down with him from the Mountain of God. On a more spiritual level, the purpose of building such a structure was to allow for God to enter the hearts of the community. This is what is meant when the Torah tells us in Exodus 25:8 when we are told: "And let them make Me a 'mikdash' that I may dwell among them."

While it is important for us to know that God will dwell among the people of Israel if they construct a 'mikdash' according to a precise set of measurements furnished to them by Moses, it is equally important for us to understand what is needed to create a sense of 'mikdash' in our own lives. From this verse it appears as though the "holiness" of what the Israelites are fashioning is quantifiable as though it is some force or energy that can be measured. When "it" (*Kedushah -holiness*) is missing to some varying degree, "it" is no longer present.

This idea is reinforced in the Torah as well as in ritual practice. Each Shabbat when three stars appear in the sky we say goodbye with a ceremony that marks the movement across a threshold in time and we bless the separations that were established with Creation. In the concluding blessing we praise God for making a distinction:

between "kodesh" and "chol",
between "light and darkness",
between "Israel and the other nations",
between "the Seventh day and the other six days of creating..."

What is the opposite of "kadosh - holy"?

In this Hebrew prayer, the opposite is referred to as "chol" and can be translated in several different ways, such as "secular, profane, ordinary..." Another way of looking at the secular world is to announce that there is much to be done so that what remains can become "kadosh" – sanctified – when we apply ourselves to that task with *kavannah*, meaning an attentiveness that is spiritual in our endeavor. We thus recognize the potential of the other days of the week and what can become of them in the same way that we

recite a blessing between Shabbat and a festival that falls on Saturday evening as a distinction between "kodesh l'kodesh".

In the midst of the details that are revealed in the Torah reading for this week the Israelites are instructed to make a distinction between an area that is designated as "kadosh" and the place where the presence of God will ultimately dwell, which receives the distinction of being called "kadosh hak'doshim" -- The Holy of Holies. It is a place where no man may venture except for the High Priest on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur. No where else are these two phrases paired in this way, which leads us to ask the question:

What is the difference between something that is "holy" and that which is "more holy"?

How can something be infused with "more" when it is already endowed with such a quality?

Earlier I mentioned that the purpose of building the *Mishkan* in the wilderness was to create a space for the presence of God to dwell. How silly this seems to those of us who spent at least one day in Hebrew School as kids. For it is there that we learned from Day One (of Hebrew School, not Creation) that "God is everywhere". If God is indeed everywhere, then it is logical for us to assume that there is no place that is not without God. If this is true, how can one place be holier than another – if God makes all things holy!?!

A very great rebbe (aren't they all great in their own way?) once asked his students: "Where is God?" These adult students were thrown by his question. Surely their teacher was kidding them. "God is everywhere!" they exclaimed with pride. To this, their teacher looked at them with disappointment as he responded, "God is wherever we let the Divine Presence in."

What makes one place holier than another is not a measurable equation of greater or lesser means. Rather, "kedushah" or "sanctity" is a measure of a person's ability to open themselves up to receive that which pours out from God. When we open our hearts we discover how much more room there is for feeling the emotions that are a part of life, both the sorrows and the joy.

I attended a wedding this past weekend in which the rabbi spoke about the *chuppah*, the wedding canopy is the symbol of a home that is meant to be filled with “*kedushah*” in the same way that two people come together beneath its protection in “*kedushin*” (the Hebrew words for ‘marriage’), declaring their responsibilities to support one another. Just as we recite the Shema and the V’Ahavta paragraphs three times each day, listening to one’s partner and sharing in their love is an important part of creating a loving relationship in which two hearts are receptive to each other’s emotions.

Coming into God’s inner sanctuary is the ultimate expression of that union between God and Israel on a communal scale. However, the “*kedushah*” or “sanctity” that it represents is not outside of our own reaches when we choose to “let God in” to our own lives.

“*Terumah*” means “gift”. I have been thinking about what is the ultimate gift we can give to ourselves this Shabbat and the days that follow?

What I am learning through my program in chaplaincy is that the most precious gift we can give to ourselves, and to others, is the gift of availability. When we learn to make ourselves available to others, to really listen not just to their words but also to the tone in which they are said, are we in a place of *kedushah*. In the same vein, when we are truly attentive to ourselves and our own needs, living in the moment rather than thinking of the past or looking ahead at the future, are we truly in a place to receive the countenance of God that is the blessing of the Torah.

It is wherever we encounter the world with a wholeheartedness that we discover our personal “*mishkan*”, that special place where God can dwell within ourselves and those whom we love. So, the spiritual challenge is to find a way to empty ourselves of those things that clutter our inner chambers that prevent us from receiving this Divine matter that waits to endow us with *kedushah*.

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Judaism teaches us in so many different ways and at a variety of levels that as individuals created in the image of God each one of us conducts an inner journey and an outer one to connect to our Creator. For our Israelite ancestors who left Egypt, connecting to the God who spoke to them amidst thunder and lightning from a mountain top, wandering in the wilderness was the method that Moses undertook to guide them in such a journey. It was an arduous journey in which an entire generation perished before coalescing themselves into a cohesive community that was ready for the blessings of entering *Eretz Yisrael* – the land promised to them by God.

Each year at Passover at our individual tables we recall a part of that journey when we recreate the birth pains that led to our going out into a vast world filled with potential, passing through the wall of water at the Sea of Reeds in the same way that an infant passes through the birth canal of its mother as it leaves the womb that nurtured it to life. We relive what it meant to take that first breath when we sing “*nishmat kol chai*” as part of the *seder* experience. We sing with gusto in praise to God, “*dayeinu*” – “it would have been enough” if this is all that God had done for us at each stage of the journey. However, in our hearts we all knew that it was never enough to rest at any particular stage of that journey when the promise of more awaited us in the future. So we forged on ! When adversities presented themselves as obstacles in our path, we justified their presence by proclaiming that such adversities were truly “*a blessing in disguise*” in the same way that each of the trials that Abraham endured enabled him to grow in his relationship with himself, with the world in which he lived, and with God.

In his introduction to a book by that same title (*A Blessing In Disguise*) compiled by Dr. Andrea Joy Cohen, philosopher Thich Nhat Hahn concludes, “*By being mindful of situations that*

are presented in our daily lives, we are able to understand them as opportunities for learning, and can consequently develop forgiveness, heal depression, resolve jealousy, or surrender control. Our healing then begins and our heart becomes open to our birthright, which is appreciation of the peace and joy within."

The problem that we face as human beings is our tendency to look beyond the present and consider the future as someplace else we would rather be, or even the past for that matter – any place but here in the moment. In doing so, we lose sight of ourselves and our capabilities to grow by being alive in the present moment. *"The capacity to feel at peace anywhere is a positive seed"* that all of us should be sowing in this world.

In the Torah reading for this week, when Moses speaks to the Children of Israel about building a container for the Ten Commandments so that it can be easily transported wherever they may travel, he invites them to give gifts that are only from the heart. God says to Moses: *"You shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him..."* (Exodus 25:2) Only later do we learn the purpose for such materials to construct a place where God may dwell. Rather than that place being designated as a box that craftsman carefully constructed from the donated materials, God says that He will dwell *"bitokham,"* which literally translated means *"in them."* The sages interpret this to mean that no single box could ever contain God's spirit. Rather, God dwells in the hearts of those who are receptive to the Divine Spirit.

Our ancient ancestors knew of the connection that exists between the heart and the mind and the tremendous influence that they have over one another. In the *Shema* that we recite twice each day we speak about loving God with all of our heart, or at least this is what the translation says. What it really means, however, is that we are commanded to have a profound respect for God that can only be accomplished when we approach our daily lives with an open mind *AND* an open heart that is not made heavy or hardened in the same way that the heart of the Pharaoh of Egypt closed himself off to the plight of the Israelites.

With the help of people who believe in alternative medicine, we are recapturing some of the mysterious ways in which the mind and the

heart can assist in healing the individual in ways that medical science can not explain. Viktor Frankl, who wrote about the experiences of survivors of the concentration camps taught the world that there is strength of character to those who believe in the power of making choices even when life appears to be grim. Our pain can either be an enemy or it can be a teacher. How we choose to react determines whether we are free or we are imprisoned to a medical diagnosis and its prognosis.

Where does happiness and inner peace come from? It comes to us when we choose not to give it away to others. Real peace is already ours when we stop limiting its availability. When we realize our own self-worth, is when we come to realize that it is not something that can be taken from us. As Sylvia Boorstein claims in the title to her new book, *"Happiness is an inside thing!"*

What is true about happiness is also true about God. In order for God to be able to dwell in the hearts and the minds of the Israelite nation, each individual must make room inside themselves for God to rest there. The choice is clearly ours. We can allow the pain that comes from stress or from emotional turmoil, or even physical ailments, to dictate our lives, or we can choose to let it go by dwelling on other things that are more positive in nature. By focusing our energy on those activities that will allow our hearts to begin healing and our lives to become more joyful is a step in the right direction.

On this Shabbat, may God find a place in each of our hearts as we search our souls for a way to open up the paths that will allow us to experience the joy that comes with being in the moment. If we encounter obstacles along the way, may God enable us to see these obstacles that threaten us merely as "blessings in disguise" as we pursue happiness in ourselves, in one another, and in God.