Parashat Terumah

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Building One Unified Whole

Terumah translates into English as contribution, gift, freewill offering, or donation. And Parashat Terumah, like its name, opens with God instructing Moses to collect donated materials in order to build the Tabernacle, for God to dwell among the Israelites.

Both the haftarah and the parashah present us with a major phase of Israelite worship: the Tabernacle, God’s portable tent while the Israelites wandered the wilderness as a young nation and the First temple, the stable shrine of the mighty empire. Each presenting a different approach to building the national structure.

In the parashah, God gives specific, detailed instructions for building the Tabernacle:

“As for the Tabernacle, make it of ten strips of cloth... The length of each cloth shall be twenty-eight cubits, and the width of each cloth shall be four cubits, **all the cloths to have the same measurements**... And make fifty gold clasps, and couple the cloths to one another with the clasps, **so that the Tabernacle becomes one whole.**” A single entity.

“The instructions for the Tabernacle create a symmetrical tapestry that perfectly fit together, creating one unified whole. Posts fit into sockets, clasps fit into loops, panels are joined to each other, and the dimensions of every component is carefully measured.”

In the haftarah, Solomon, when building his temple, does not follow the plan described in the parashah. To build the First Temple, “King Solomon imposes forced labour on all Israel. He sends them to the Lebanon in shifts of 10,000 a month: they spend one month in the Lebanon and two months at home. Solomon also has 70,000 porters and 80,000 quarriers in the hills, apart from Solomon’s 3,300 officials who are in charge of the work and supervise the gangs doing the work.”

In stark contrast to Solomon’s approach, God speaks to Moses, saying:

“Tell the Israelite people to **bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart is so moved. And let them make Me a sanctuary** that I may dwell among them.”

In the parashah, the whole community is invited to work together and contribute to the building of the Tabernacle, creating a unifying experience for all Israel. All members of the community, both men and women, actively participate in bringing God’s presence into their midst. The Hebrew verb, la’asot (to make) occurs two hundred times in the story of the building of the sanctuary.

Solomon’s approach, however, is coercion, separation of families, and hierarchical division of the labour force. The labourers who are sent to the Lebanon spend one month in the Lebanon and two months at home.” Not only does this separate families, but this arrangement may possibly create financial hardship for some families who depend on those members for their support and sustenance.

The division of the workers into labourers and supervisors also creates separation and division within the community. Solomon’s coercive approach to building the Temple results in discontent and eventually, to a broken nation. The kingdom immediately splits apart after Solomon’s death.

The Talmud says that the Second Temple was destroyed because of civic enmity and tells a story of two men Kamtza and bar Kamtza whose hatred for each other led to the downfall of Jerusalem. The story emphasizes the need for Jews to treat one another with brotherly respect. Contempt for other Jews is the sin that leads to the downfall of the whole people.

For much of 2023, politics disunified Israel, and some Israelis, fed up with the Diaspora giving their opinion on the political situation in Israel, suggested that the “Galut” or Diaspora do not have a say in how things are run in Israel. Then October 7th occurred and global antisemitism has made it clear how very connected we are. When Israel sneezes, we in the Diaspora catch a cold. We are stitched together like the Tabernacle. We are one whole.

Sadly, unlike the cloths of the Tabernacle that were equally measured, some members of Israeli society feel that their contributions are not given the same status as other members of the society. For example, “female surveillance soldiers responsible for watching the Gaza border described how senior commanders refused to heed their warnings in the weeks before the brutal Hamas massacre and the soldiers believe sexism was a factor in their being ignored. Their unit is one made up entirely of young girls and young female commanders.”

How would history have enfolded, if instead of being ignored, their contribution was appreciated and heeded?

The haftorah describes an involuntary workforce tasked with the building of a grand structure where people would go to worship God. The parashah describes a community coming together and voluntarily contributing gifts and talents to create a simple structure to enable God to dwell among them.

This parashah demonstrates that we can only build a strong society when we recognize and appreciate the importance of unity and civic friendship to the stability of the structure. Building through coercion leads to civic enmity, weakens the structure, and risks collapse. The strength of Israel is in its people. And we are as strong as our unity.

Etz Hayim describes the Tabernacle as symbolizing Am Yisrael. Am Yisrael, like the Tabernacle, is composed of many parts, but we must form one harmonious whole. Israel, Diaspora, Observant, Non-Observant, Left, Right, men, women, young, old. All stitched together. We no longer have the Tabernacle. We no longer have the Temple. But we do have one another. And we must work together to build Am Yisrael as a whole.

Shabbat Shalom!

Roslyn Bryan

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