

**Parshat Terumah**  
**February 5, 2011**  
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The Book of Genesis devotes 34 verses to the creation of the world, but the Book of Exodus dedicates almost 400 verses to the details of the building of the Tabernacle, not to mention additional detailed descriptions of the Priestly garments and duties...all of which is elaborated later in the Book of Leviticus. Over ten times as much space is devoted to the construction of a simple tent structure - 20 planks long and 8 planks wide; not even covered by a roof, but by curtains; ten times as much space is dedicated in the Bible to this *Mishkan* than to the Creation of the entire universe and all that it contains!

There has to be some explanation to this disparity. There has to be some logic to a Bible that breezes through the creation of the entire universe in 34 verses but pauses for 400 verses on the building of a tent!

I believe that there is an explanation – and a profound one at that and given the current state of our world we desperately need. Our television screens are filled with images of the chaos in Egypt and we have so many questions. Is what we see the beginning of something good – or the end of it? Is this the birth of democracy or the end of any hope for a safer world? Maybe *Parshat Terumah* has something to say to help us make sense of the moment, which we now confront.

The Torah does not teach us very much about the construction of the world, only 34 verses. But, it does focus on our responsibilities to build structures in the world in which we find ourselves. God created the world; but, we have duties within that world that God created. The *mishkan*, the small sanctuary was not God given, but would be the result of our own efforts and creativity.

34 verses were dedicated to the creation of the world - because it is important for us to know who created the world in which we live and why it was created. But, having established those facts the Bible is clearly not much interested in how the universe came into being and much more interested in addressing the question, so, what are you going to do with this world that I have created?

The world that was created by God was not handed to us as a *fait accompli* but as a work in progress. It is our challenge to finish the work that God began and the Bible is intended to be *our* blueprint not God's - hence the emphasis on the structures *we* must build as opposed to the universe which God created.

This is why the rabbis tell us that the details of the building of the Tabernacle, found in today's torah portion, were intended as a paradigm, as a model for the structures we must build to make this world a better place. For the rabbis, today's *parasha* became a challenge to every generation – just as our ancestors were called upon to build the *mishkan* – so each and every successive generation was called upon to build the structures necessary for their generation – to make it a more livable place. This is stated very succinctly in today's torah reading: Exodus 25:8 *V'asu li*

*mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham* - God says to the people: "Make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell among you." We are challenged to build the institutions and then God will decide if the world we have constructed is worthy of His presence.

I was raised in a generation, the so-called 60's generation, where we took this challenge very seriously. We believed that we had the power to transform the world, to make it a better place – a more human place. With time and effort we believed that war and hunger, human suffering and injustice could be eradicated from the face of the earth. We were an optimistic bunch as we rolled up our sleeves and waited for our chance to run the world. What happened?

Under our stewardship – the world has become a darker place – optimism has been replaced by cynicism and problems that once seemed solvable seem hopelessly intractable. When I grew up I got my news by listening to Walter Conkrite – my children get their news by listening to Jon Stewart. And that's the way it is. If Walter Conkrite was a spokesman for that time – Jon Stewart is indeed a spokesman for our times.

Mine was a generation of John F. Kennedy – when politicians made us believe that the future was in our hands. But this is an age of cynicism and Jon Stewart is a prophet for the times – as he makes fun of politicians and journalists alike. In reminding us that they are not doing their job we cannot help but be challenged to ask than who will do it?

The Ark of the Covenant, the *mishkan* we are taught in today's torah reading, was to be covered with gold, inside and out. Why? Why not just on the outside. If you remember that the materials used in the building of the *mishkan* were the generous donations of a recently freed, rag tag group of slaves wandering in the wilderness. Precious metals were clearly a valued commodity. And if you add to that the fact that the *mishkan* was only seen from the outside - that is, if you remember that no one but Aaron the High Priest entered the inner sanctum of the Tabernacle, ever - it seems even more puzzling why the Torah insists that it had to be covered in gold - inside and out, when that inside would be seen by only one person! Like those Hollywood sets – which are all façade – but there is nothing behind the façade, they look good when the movie is shot – but we never get to see the inside. I remember the first time I went to Petra after having seen Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. It was filled at Petra – using the magnificent treasury building as a façade – in the movie they walked through the door to reveal a magnificent temple inside. In the real Petra, I walked through the door to reveal a small, dank and dark empty room. I was so disappointed.

But if disappointment is the result of learning that our movies are not really real – imagine the disappointment when we learn that our financial institutions are not real, our houses are not worth what we thought they were and our health care and retirement funds were based on an illusion.

Cynicism is a response to hypocrisy. When time after time we learn that the glitter was only painted on the outside. When time after time we are forced to accept that *tocho lo k'boro* – that the inside is nothing like what we saw on the outside, when time after time our leaders disappoint us – we become cynical. When politicians lie and are corrupt, when journalists fabricate material, when religious leaders, who preach morality, molest young children – cynicism is the appropriate response.

We are being told that we Jews have a conundrum. As Doniel Hartman wrote this week: "As Jews our natural affinity group is the oppressed." Legally, this has been the moral imperative of the Jew since our Exodus from Egypt. Instead of serving solely as a narrative depicting God's covenant with the Jewish people, our tradition positioned the Exodus story as the paradigm for God's covenant with the powerless and downtrodden. As Jews who are commanded to emulate God, we are thus also bound to create a covenantal community not only with Jews but with all who are in need.

When people take to the streets and lay claim to their inalienable rights as free people, when they ask that their government be of the people and for the people, when they plead for an equitable and just distribution of their society's goods, the natural response of the Jew is to stand at their side. "Love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Leviticus 19)

And yet, we Jews and especially Jewish Israelis find ourselves particularly challenged. We yearn for a democratic Middle East. Deep down, we often suspect that only in a democratic Middle East will Israel achieve the peace for which we all dream. Only when peace is made between free peoples, ratified by their elected governments, will it have a viable and sustainable future.

But in Israel's brief historical experience it has yet to meet such people. Time and time again – it has welcomed democratic uprisings only to see them replaced by another form of despotism – a religious fundamentalism as is found in Hamas or Hizbollah or Iran that not only oppresses their own people but seeks the destruction of ours. And so the cynic argues – the choice is not between oppression and freedom, not between the rights of the people and the power of the dictator – but between the lesser of evils – should we make peace with a despot that is in our interest or one that threatens us?

And now we understand why the torah dedicates over 400 verses to the building of the *mishkan* – *V'asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham* - God says to the people: "Make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell among you." Constructing the human institutions that will determine whether our world is worthy of God's presence – remains in 2011 the fundamental challenge of human existence.

We must reject the path of cynicism. How easy is it to say – "they are all hypocrites!" "It is façade and farce as far as the eye can see -- And then use that to justify a path we know deep down is flawed.

There is a fundamental hypocrisy that underscores most of our lives – and I think the rabbis were calling us on it in their exposition of today's torah reading.

If I asked you to choose which is more important: what a person is on the outside or what a person is on the inside - we would, I suspect, have a very clear and definite opinion. Is there anyone here – who would argue that it is more important what a person is on the outside? No, to a person – we would all insist – that who and what you are – inside is of the utmost importance to any kind of valuation to our worth as a human being. But while all of us would *argue* this way too many of us live our lives in the day-to-day decisions we make as if the opposite were true. We

insist that our inside values must match our outside appearance and yet too many of us live as if what is most important is on the outside - as we strive to create a life of proper appearances and status. We live in a world where we are judged by superficial qualities - so is it at all surprising that so many of us should spend so much time attending to those qualities which will enhance our stature in a world that is much too superficial?

There is a word for such an approach to life – hypocrisy. And if today's parasha of teruma teaches us anything – it comes to teach us that God wants no part of a world that is built on a foundation of hypocrisy. *Tocho k'bora* - insist the rabbis. The outside must reflect the inside – the inside must reflect the outside – only if the human institutions we build are built on a fundamental foundation of integrity will God dwell in our midst. 400 verses and 2000 years later – we still have not figured this out.

I have no problem with those who signed a peace treaty with Sadat and maintained it with Mubarak. We do not get to choose our enemies – and we make peace with the enemies we have – not the ones we wish we had. We made peace with Egypt and its despotic and corrupt leaders – because we had no choice – they were the only leaders they had.

But now we do have a choice – and we must choose to stand with the people over the hypocrisy of the past. That is the only thing a Jew should ever do.

I believe that our American Government is finding its way to this path. I hope the Israeli government will do likewise – although I am less confident. Although, I understand their dilemma – they have so much more at stake. For America – a wrong decision is a diplomatic blunder. For Israel a wrong decision may be one of life or death for a fragile nation. But the increased consequences only increase the importance of getting this right.

*V'asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham* - "Make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell among you." These words challenge us today – no less than they did our ancestors standing on the plains of Moab 3200 years ago.

We are challenged to build institutions and hope that God will deem them worthy. God will decide if the world we have constructed is worthy of His presence. And we know what will make them worthy – if and only if they are built on a foundation of integrity. There is much work to be done – it is time to start building again.