

Parshat Terumah 2017
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There is an old joke about a new rabbi, as he is starting out in his new congregation. The synagogue president wants the young rabbi to be a success so he puts his arm around the young man and gives him some advice. "Listen," he says, "most of our people no longer keep kashrut so if you want to be successful here my advice is not to talk very much about kashrut." And," the president went on to say, "the people in our congregation are very busy – so most of them cannot keep Shabbat, so you might want to avoid that as a topic. And we are not a very wealthy congregation and people do the best they can – so don't talk too much about *tzedakah*." Frustrated the young rabbi says, "So if I can't talk about kashrut and I can't talk about Shabbat and I can't talk about *tzedakah*, what should I talk about?" The president smiles and says, "Why rabbi, talk about Judaism!"

The humor in that joke is that a rabbi who should talk about Judaism must talk about Shabbat and kashrut and *tzedakah*. But, the reason I was reminded of that old joke is that never in all my career as a rabbi do I remember being as sensitive to "what" I would be talking about as in the last few months.

A few weeks ago, I gave a sermon about the importance of truth in Judaism. Yet one person came up to me at the *kiddush* and said, "boy rabbi you are really getting political these days." I was left scratching my head – since when is a rabbi, using the *parasha* to talk about the importance of truth – a political sermon? Such is the nature of our times.

The issue of what rabbis should and should not talk about is without a doubt, the most discussed question whenever rabbis get together these days. There are two schools of thought on this matter. One says that the job of the rabbi is to be current, to ground contemporary events in our sacred tradition. To make Torah relevant and at the same time to connect the issues of our day to our sacred and ancient tradition.

But there are also those who believe the sanctuary should be, well a sanctuary – an escape; a place we come to get away from the relentless pounding of our contemporary world – a place of respite and calm where we connect with eternal issues and larger questions.

I think they are both correct. And while on any particular Shabbat my comments may be from one school or the other – over the course of time, as I believe our regulars will attest, in this place you can learn a Torah that gives insight into life's larger questions **and** learn a Torah that gives insight into how we navigate the challenges of our day.

So, what's it going to be today? Well today I would like to take a few moments and talk to you about God. And later at the *kiddush* you can tell me in which category you think it falls – life's larger questions or an aid into navigating the challenges of our day.

I had the pleasure of learning the following Torah from my own son while I was out in LA this past week, visiting family. He was teaching about this week's Torah portion and his teaching inspired me to include his insight in my remarks today. Today's Torah portion is *Terumah* and it contains one of the most significant yet troubling and challenging verses in the entire Torah.

In Exodus 25:8 (page 487 in our Eytz Hayyim Bibles), the Torah states in the name of God: “*V’asu LI Mikdash V’shachanti B’tocham*” “And let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.” Was the sanctuary really to be God’s home? Was that where God was to be found? This is not an easy verse. Where is God?

Not a simple question. And it would take a full course to even begin to address it from a Jewish perspective. But, because I am your rabbi, and because I like you, I will attempt to summarize this complex issue in a few minutes. There are essentially three schools of thought in Judaism on this: “where is God” question.. The first one answers this question by saying there is no there, there. God exists in a realm beyond any category known to man. Space and time are human constructs, to describe a universe that we inhabit but one that cannot and does not constrain God. Space and time are far too limiting concepts to understand a God that exists beyond space and beyond time.

The second school of thought about where God can be found, is the one that is captured in our siddur, in the *kiddusha* when we say – *m’loh Kol Haaretz k’vodo* --- “the whole earth is filled with God’s glory...”. Where is God? God is everywhere. God’s presence infuses every aspect of creation and God can be found in everything that exists.

The third school of thought is the one represented by today’s Torah reading – but it is one that made our rabbis extremely uncomfortable. So uncomfortable that they felt the need to transform it into something very different, but uniquely Jewish.

Exodus 25:8 states very succinctly but very clearly: “Let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them...” To read this literally seems to imply that the answer to “where is God” is “there is God”. That God can be found in a place. That God can exist in time and in space – at a specific moment in a particular place – the *Beit Hamikdash* – The Holy Temple. In this reading – the *mishkan* and later its more elaborate iteration the Temple –is truly God’s house. It is where God can be found.

And not only, can God be found in that house – but the Torah even tells us where in that house God can be found: In Exodus 25:20 (page 489) – just a little bit further on in the same chapter it states: “And the cherubim shall spread out their wings on high, screening the ark-cover with their wings, with their faces one to another; toward the ark-cover shall the faces of the cherubim be.”

The ark was a magnificent central part of the architecture of the Temple and over the ark where these two very large angelic creatures called *Keruvim* – with their wings spread out almost touching – and there, right there in the space between their wings that was where God could be found.

For most of us today – this last notion of a God who literally dwelled in the Temple and occupied a space between the wings of the *Keruvim* is hard to swallow – yet the Torah seems pretty clear. Our ancient rabbis also had a difficult time with this notion. 2000 years ago – this idea of God making his home in the Temple was a problem for them as well. Some of them for theological reasons, some of them for existential reasons. Theologically some of them just preferred the notion of a God who was nowhere or a God who was everywhere to a God who was somewhere – in a particular spot on earth. But, this notion also presented an existential

dilemma for the rabbis who lived after the destruction of the Temple. If God was there and there is no more – where is God to be found in a post-Temple, post-destruction world?

But the Torah could not be wrong – so how would they deal with a verse that explicitly seems to state that when we build this house – God will be found there?

Well the Torah may not be wrong – but it is often not very clear about its exact intentions – leaving room for centuries of rabbinic interpretation. And our ancient rabbis discovered a textual problem in these verses, and in the resolution to that problem they found the resolution to their dilemma. The verse here in Exodus describes the *Keruvim* as *u'fnaihem ish l'achiv* – they faced inward, toward each other. But the rabbis noticed that later in the Bible there is a description of these same *Keruvim* in the book of Chronicles that offers a very different orientation – there in II Chronicles 3:13 it states: *u'fnaihem l'bayit* – their faces were outward looking!

Well which was it? Did they face inward or outward? It was this contradiction that the rabbis focused on in a discussion in the Talmud in **BT Bava Batra 99a**: “And how do they {the cherubs} stand? Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Eliezer [debate]: One taught that the two *keruvim* faced one another; the other taught that they faced the Temple. And each one cited a biblical text to support their opinion – Rabbi Eliezer to the one here in Exodus where the *Keruvim* faced each other and Rabbi Yochanan to the one in Chronicles where they faced outward. But then the Talmud resolves this dispute in a fascinating way. It suggests that the two quotes cited by the two rabbis is not a contradiction at all, not a problem at all. So which way did the *Keruvim* face? The Talmud says that when the people of Israel were doing the will of God they faced inward, toward each other but when the people of Israel were not doing the will of God – the *Keruvim* turned and faced outward!

Wow – what an amazing teaching. In place of a textual contradiction – the rabbis use these problematic verses to make a profound statement about God.

Where is God found? The rabbis suggest that the true answer to this question is actually found in an even better question – and that is when is God found? The question for the rabbis is not where is God but when is God? And the rabbis suggest that God is found not in places but in moments.

In fact those words of Exodus from today's Torah reading if studied carefully seem to say as much: “*V'asu LI Mikdash V'shachanti B'tocham*” “And let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.”

When we first read those words we thought the Bible was telling us – “let them make me a sanctuary and I will dwell there...”, but now we understand that what those words are really saying is: “let them make me a sanctuary and **then** I will dwell amongst them!” “Make me a sanctuary, *V'shachanti b'tocham* – Make me a sanctuary says God and I will dwell among you – between you – just as I occupy the space between those two *Keruvim*, I occupy any space where two people meet in my name, I occupy any space where people are good to each other, where they are kind to each other, where they help each other and love each other. But where people hate and where people hurt and where helping hands are withdrawn – where faces are turned outward rather than inward –there, God says, I cannot be found. We travel the world

looking for revelations in exotic places but our Torah teaches us that God is found not in mysterious places – God is found in precious moments.

Today's reading teaches that the real question in life is not where is God, but when is God: When an act of love brings a new life into the world. When a child is born and we hold him, we hold her in our arms - -God is there. When a parent or a loved one dies – and in a gesture of love, we hold their hands for the last time – God is there. When a young girl stands up to the bema and proudly asserts her commitment – to Torah to the Jewish people and to righteous living – God is there.

So, you came to shul fully expecting I would speak about the alarming rise in anti-Semitism, the disturbing renewal of ancient hatreds against Jews and immigrants and Muslims. Maybe you are a little bit disappointed that I did not speak about health care and our responsibility to care for the sick and the vulnerable in our midst. Instead I spoke about God.

But if you will take just a moment to think about what I said – I believe you will see that I did speak about all those things. In today's Torah portion, our ancestors were instructed to build a place for God. A world in which God would delight to dwell. *V'asu LI mikdash – v'shachanti btocham* – make a holy place for me, make this place holy and then and only then will I dwell in your midst; make this world better and I will be there to help.

One day, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk the Kotzker rebbe turned to his students and asked: "Where is God found?" One brave student raised his hand and said, "God is in heaven." A second student suggested, "God is everywhere!" Again, the rabbi shook his head. A third student said: "God is beyond this world – no human can know His dwelling place" – again the rabbi shook his head. Stumped the students went silent until the great rabbi said: "God is wherever we let Him in."

We live in a world that is increasingly turning its face outward – away from each other and it is becoming a frightening place. But as I said in my letter to our community this past week – speaking about the rise in anti-Semitic acts against JCC's, Day Schools and Jewish Cemeteries:

"In this time of increased hatred, I urge our community to remain vigilant, to be cautious, and to respond to these events with acts of love and caring. The more they hate -- the more we love. Rather than allowing them to make us hateful or fearful - let us become more caring and more loving. It will drive them crazy.

Give some extra *tzedakah*, feed someone who is hungry. Come to Shul and show them we are not afraid to build lives of meaning and strength. And let us be on the side of those who would create a world in which hate has no place."

In a world that is turning its face outward away from its fellowman – we must face each other, love each other, be concerned for each other and care for each other. Then, and only then, will God choose to dwell in our midst.