

Drash for parashat Terumah: Exodus 25:1 – 27:19

Feb. 25, 2023

Shabbat shalom.

Karen and I recently renovated the kitchen in our home, which I would like to tell you about. Our old kitchen was fine – perfectly functional, bright and spacious, with enough storage for normal people, but it was showing its age. We could have refinished the cabinets and found a reasonably-priced light fixture to install ourselves, but we didn't. Instead, we hired a contractor, and spent more time than I am comfortable describing looking at countertop material and discussing paint colors. We then spent several weeks cooking with a hotplate (courtesy of Noga and Josh) in our living room, while the work was done. We now have a kitchen that we love, but at the cost of considerable expense, time, and bother. Why did we do that? And very importantly, should we have done something else with our money, time, and effort?

Today's parashah is over the top – a biblical extravaganza of Ikea assembly instructions, with luxury materials:

You shall make the planks for the Tabernacle of acacia wood, upright. The length of each plank shall be ten cubits and the width of each plank a cubit and a half. Each plank shall have two tenons, parallel to each other...

....make twenty planks on the south side: making forty silver sockets under the twenty planks, two sockets under the one plank for its two tenons and two sockets under each following plank for its two tenons...

...and make two planks for the corners of the Tabernacle at the rear. They shall match at the bottom, and terminate alike at the top inside one ring...they shall form the two corners.

Perhaps you are now sharing my mental image of the guy trying put this thing together. He accidentally installed one of the planks upside down and the tenons don't fit, so the corners are wonky and he has to take it all apart and start again.

But what is this really about? This is Exodus – the Israelites are in the desert, surely struggling for existence in a harsh environment, with very limited resources. Why are they instructed to build such a luxurious and elaborate Mishkan? Couldn't it wait? Didn't they have more urgent matters to deal with, like finding food, water, and shade for the most vulnerable among them?

Asked another way: in a world in which there are so many urgent needs for basic survival, how can we justify spending our time and resources on beautiful things?

We confront similar questions in our lives every day on the streets of Berkeley, when we pass a homeless encampment, or someone asking for a few dollars for a meal.

There is a well-known essay by the philosopher Peter Singer entitled “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”, which takes such questions to the extreme. Singer wrote

it in the early 1970s, in response to famine in Bangladesh. In it, he argues that it is a moral imperative to reduce poverty by all means available to us. He writes: "If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then we ought, morally, to do it...It makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor's child ten yards from me or someone whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away."

In other words, it is a moral imperative to alleviate all suffering by all means available to us, limited only by the need not to impoverish and make ourselves suffer as a result.

This proposal is surely an extreme and entirely unrealistic approach to living, and few people have taken it. But it provides a useful straw-man argument: why is it extreme and unrealistic, and why can't we live like that?

Today's parashah about the Mishkan can help us answer that question. Moses Mendelsohn distinguished three kinds of human skills and creativity needed to construct the Mishkan:

- The provision of food, clothing and shelter for the community. These are the most basic elements needed for human survival, without which we cannot live even at a subsistence level.
- The provision of tools and utensils, and building the wooden structures of the Mishkan. Such things are of practical importance in our lives, providing safety and efficiency.

- The creation of beautiful things: golden cherubim, cups shaped like almond blossoms, curtains of blue, purple and crimson linen. These serve no practical purpose, other than simply to be beautiful.

But without beauty, the Mishkan would have been just another structure – it would not inspire the sense of being a sacred space where God could dwell. It is the beauty that moves us deeply. It is the beauty that makes it the Mishkan.

We find spiritual inspiration in a Shabbat table set with family heirlooms, and at a seder laid out with dishes and symbolic foods that evoke deep memory. These objects in themselves have no special practical purpose, but they – nevertheless - help lift us to the highest spiritual heights.

We also find inspiration in the light-filled Netivot Shalom sanctuary, in the sumptuous tent of our ark, in Josh and Blair's gorgeous Aron haKodesh. These are all just objects, but they are also so much more than objects. Their beauty makes this a special place, which draws us together and creates our community.

So why did the Israelites need to build a beautiful Mishkan, at this moment in their arduous journey? They had stood at Sinai, but that was now a memory. They needed a sacred space that invoked the presence of God, to serve as the focus of their community and to bring them together. This was not optional; it was not a luxury. Our wonderful Netivot Shalom sanctuary serves the same purpose for us.

Shabbat Shalom