

Netivot Drash Legacy Shabbat 250301 Parshat Terumah, Shemot (Exodus) 27:9-27:19

The Parsha, for this week, Terumah, is considered appropriate for our Legacy Shabbat because it begins with the people being asked for voluntary gifts to build the Mikdash. But I want to think instead about the Parsha's preoccupation with what Robert Alter charmingly calls a "lengthy account of cultic paraphernalia."

When God says

וְעָשׂוּ לִי, מִקְדָּשׁ; וְשָׁכַנְתִּי, בְּתוֹכָם.

V'asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham, [Debbie Friedman's beautiful melody] "Let them *make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among* them." (or as Rabbi Kelman reminds us, "dwell within us") we might still ask why God is so concerned with architecture, furnishings, and décor—all this "stuff." To awe and inspire, perhaps, to give concrete presence to a God who has gone up to the inaccessible Mt. Siani. But there is another answer, one that touches on the nature of life--and of death.

A few months ago I read an essay making the striking argument that life itself--the evolution of life on earth from the first complex molecules that absorbed the sun's energy to reproduce yet-more-complex molecules, to the teeming life of which we ourselves are one small part--is in tension with the Second Law of Thermodynamics, "that the entropy (disorder) of an isolated system always increases over time, meaning natural processes tend towards greater disorder," that all processes lead ultimately to the loss of organization and structure, to decay. But

despite the larger inevitability of entropy, life forms have evolved miraculous levels of complexity. Life itself is, in some sense, that evolutionary selection for what can reproduce and then increase the organization of matter. Resisting, if not quite overcoming, disorder and decay, creating complex forms, building up, I would argue, we participate in the essence of life itself. And human beings build in distinctive ways. They build not only material things (as do beavers, ants, corals, spiders, birds, bees, and many other creatures), they build institutions and cultures.

What do I mean by “institutions”? They are all those humanly-created things—laws, governments, families, schools, tribes, peoples, and yes, religious communities—that embody enduring human purposes.

Institutions and cultures have everything to do with “legacy,” both what we inherit from the enormously long line of those who came before us, and what we leave for those who came after us—even for the wonderful young people leading services today.

We live in a moment when we see how easy it is to dismantle or destroy institutions. We see the devastating effects of losing a sense of historical continuity, of losing respect, or reverence, for the cumulative achievements of those who came before us, of depleting, wasting the rich institutional and cultural heritage upon which our common life depends.

As Jews, however, I think we have a particularly acute appreciation of our deep religious and institutional heritage, and of the responsibility we have to preserve it and to build on it. The Pirke Avot's admonition to "build a fence around the Torah" is sometimes taken to mean "don't go anywhere near violating its laws." But I see it as an instruction to cherish, to add to, to build up the rich institutional, cultural and religious heritage that our ancestors, going back to Sinai, have given us. We are given an "endowment," and we can either deplete it or sustain and add to it.

The concept of a legacy matters to every generation, but the question becomes particularly urgent for those of us who are, shall I say, well beyond our teens. It raises questions of life and death, of what it means to have lived, and what it will mean to die.

Death is a loss of that organization, that remarkable way in which life itself sustains and builds organization in the face of the inevitable entropy of all matter. How then do you sustain life beyond yourself? I would argue by "investing" one's moral character, one's understanding, one's wisdom, and one's material resources to strengthen the institutions and the culture that will live after you; by building up the value and meaning of something greater than yourself. It isn't a matter of putting your brain on a chip like Elon, colonizing Mars, or any of the other fantasies our current Masters of the Universe in Silicon Valley are dreaming up (after all, isn't it the terror of death that drives all their frenzied activity?). But the

real secret is to put yourself into what outlives you, into the tradition, the culture and the institutions that will nurture generations to come.

Some of you know that one of my mentors was the great scholar of religion, Robert Bellah. While he was completing his masterwork, RELIGION IN HUMAN EVOLUTION, he wrote a note to the son of a friend who had died. Bellah wasn't Jewish (although he read Hebrew and wrote with deep understanding of ancient Judaism), was indeed a very Protestant Protestant, but I nonetheless want to read part of what he wrote:

Dear Sam:

Where were you before you were born? That's where you will go after you die. Well before I was born, I was in the sperm of my father and the egg of my mother, I had within me the earliest beginnings of the components of a billion or more years of life, the genes that I share with worms (a lot) and with mold (some), and the atoms that I share with the universe all the way back to the big bang. So returning to all that isn't so bad. Further, I will join the company of saints, of all those whose cultural work has made it possible for me to have been a half-way decent person, and what I have added to the cultural pool, even when I am long forgotten, will go on having an influence (unless we become extinct soon, which is also possible) for a long, perhaps an immeasurable time.

He concludes with a bit of very Christian sacrilege, which I won't repeat here, but the underlying sense of our own place in the long continuity of evolutionary time, of the more specific heritage that we carry forward as our legacy, and of our responsibility to build up the institutions and meanings that make common life possible: That is the deep truth that I think our Parsha's interest in the building of our first sanctuary conveys.

SHABBAT SHALOM