

## Pekudei Drash 3/29/25 Rabbi Chai Levy Congregation Netivot Shalom

It's not easy to live in our world right now

I don't need to list all the ways that norms are being dismantled and how we might feel helpless in all of the chaos.

This week in my study of the Piasezner rebbe with our Wednesday hasidut group, we read passages from Esh Kodesh, the book he wrote in the Warsaw ghetto, in which he tried to inspire his hasidim to stay spiritually and religiously connected, even with all that suffering.

He reminded them: the Torah was given in the *midbar* (desert) to teach us that we can stay connected to God anywhere. In exile. Not just in joyful times, but in times of suffering and hardship too. In the midbar.

With that in mind, it's interesting to me that the Torah spends so many chapters on the building of the mishkan. A third of the book of Exodus. Five weeks of readings about the detailed architecture, craftsmanship, and construction of the

cloths, planks, sacred vessels, priestly garments, precious metals.

So soon after leaving slavery in Egypt, just a few months later!

We are encamped in the wilderness

we just experienced the giving of law at Sinai

And now we read verse after verse about craftsmanship and beauty.

Blue, purple, and crimson yarn; fine twisted linen, lapis lazuli, aromatic incense. Embroidery, engraving, carpentry, metal work, all done with a willing heart and a lifted spirit;

priestly vestments with a gold breastpiece of precious stones and a robe with a hem adorned with pomegranates and gold bells.

The Torah says that all these special priestly garments are meant

*L'Kavod ul'tifaret* (Exodus 28:2) - for dignity and beauty

And that's what I want to think about with you today:  
Dignity and Beauty, and their spiritual purpose in the *midbar*,  
in wilderness times.

You may have noticed that I've been talking a lot in recent months  
about spiritual resistance and staying human in inhumane times.  
I keep returning to the line from Pirkei Avot that has become my  
mantra: *B'makom she'ain anashim, hishtadel lehiyot ish*

וּבְמָקוֹם שֶׁאֵין אָנָשִׁים, הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לְהִיּוֹת אִישׁ

Pirkei Avot 2:5

Where there is a lack of humanity, try to be human.

And I want to suggest that the beauty, dignity, artistry, craftsmanship of  
the mishkan is a key element in retaining our humanity,  
(Along with, of course, practicing acts of compassion, love for our  
neighbor, and care for the vulnerable)

*Finding beauty is cultivating spiritual resistance and resilience.*

The Torah's instructions to create dignity and beauty in the middle of a  
desert, when we had just been slaves in Egypt,  
is an invitation to us to create dignity and beauty in a world where the  
forces of degradation and ugliness threaten to overpower humanity.

Beauty awakens us, heals us, inspires us to be our better selves.

Some of us saw the musical Hadestown last week at Berkeley High and  
felt that healing power of beauty there in that high school auditorium  
with those talented teenagers growing up in this crazy world that is  
filled with such awfulness.

But these teens were singing, expressing, with their incredible sets and  
music (shout out to Meyer Lewis and Nevo N-K)

About the power of a beautiful song to bring the world back into tune  
and express love and hope in a dark time of injustice, climate change,  
authoritarianism, greed:

*someone's got to tell the tale  
Whether or not it turns out well  
Maybe it will turn out this time  
On the road to Hell  
On the railroad line  
It's a sad song  
It's a sad tale, it's a tragedy  
It's a sad song  
We're gonna sing it anyway*

This year, reading about the mishkan felt the same way to me:  
An assertion of beauty, dignity, creativity, generosity, connectedness,  
holiness in the midst of the wilderness.

Think about it: we just fled slavery in Egypt and  
even though we didn't even have time to let the dough rise(!),  
we managed to bring all of these materials with us into the wilderness,  
and now the Torah spends 5 weeks talking about women spinning yarn  
and doing embroidery and people doing carving, weaving and  
carpentry!

I think the Torah is giving us a needed message for our time.  
We need dignity and beauty (*kvod and tiferet*), especially in the midbar.  
The Torah details the beauty of the mishkan and tells us that the Divine  
resides at the center of it all.

Like the song in Hadestown (*la la la la la...*),  
it's a reminder that creating or experiencing beauty allows us to retain  
our humanity, which is so desperately needed in these times.  
I've seen this expressed in some of the released hostages and Nova  
survivors. They're making music and dancing.  
It's the healing power of maintaining our humanity when we might  
otherwise be consumed by fear and rage and have those reign over our  
nervous systems, our psyches, and our world.

[Andrea Scher](#), a local artist and creativity coach I know, recently wrote: We are living through a time of massive, unacknowledged collective grief. And we have neither the language nor the rituals to process what we're going through.

And she shared a podcast interview she did some years ago with a therapist and grief ritualist named [Francis Weller](#). She asked him about the role of art and beauty as a healing force in the world.

He answered: “Beauty is indispensable to the soul of wellbeing. Whether that's the beauty of language through poetry, or the beauty of creation. Beauty is the means whereby God [he said “the gods”] touches the senses, reaches the heart and attracts us into life... Because you cannot grieve, you cannot be joyous, you cannot love, with a body that's numb.”

This is what the work of our member, Rabbi Adina Allen, is about: The Jewish Studio Process, which myself and several of our members have studied with her. She's going to be our teacher at Shavuot this year and talk about her [book](#), which is about Torah being a guidebook for creativity.

We need this now, in this midbar time filled with so much grief, uncertainty, overwhelm - to tap into the healing power of beauty and creativity as a force for dignity and humanity in our world -  
Alongside action, legislation, and caring for those who are threatened.

I saw the beauty of the mishkan in this light for the first time this year.  
We may not be weavers or carpenters  
Or feel we have the skills to create the kind of work we see in the mishkan, but here's what we *do* have, all of us:  
The ability to experience and feel beauty,  
to take breaks from the news and social media,

and to seek out beauty and wonder.

Have you heard about “[Glimmers](#)”?

“Glimmers” are the opposite of triggers.

Triggers evoke negative feelings like agitation and fear and activate our sympathetic nervous system;

glimmers activate our parasympathetic nervous system, evoking positive feelings of calm, gratitude, goodwill.

“Glimmers” are good for our mental health and counter the effects of the stress that we are all feeling.

You can practice spiritual resistance in these times by opening yourself to glimmers. Glimmers of beauty: For example,

Get off the screen and go outside and feel the warmth of the sun on your skin

Listen to your favorite song or to the birds chirping

Smell bread baking or a blooming flower. (have you stopped to smell the wisteria out in the front courtyard? That’s a glimmer!)

Relish the taste of something delicious.

Allows these glimmers to remind you of all that is good,

And consider it an act of spiritual resistance, resilience and humanity,

To create a momentary *mishkan* in the desert,

A Divine dwelling place in this world

*L’kavod u’letifaret*, for dignity and beauty.