



Carnegie Shul Chatter

February 18, 2021

SHABBAT SHALOM

SABBATH PEACE

Light candles 5:42pm Services on Zoom 10am

Zoom in for Services

Our abbreviated Shabbos service begins at 10 am and lasts for approximately an hour. Click here to join:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89243290583?pwd=aGt0bUFDYUyT0ZtR2hCU2JNRkdBdz09>

Find the Birnbaum siddur at: <https://opensiddur.org/compilations/liturgical/siddurim/kol-bo/hasiddur-hashalem-by-paltiel-birnbaum-1949/>

Finding God Everywhere

Our main article by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has an interesting question, or three, in it. “How do we come to sense the presence of God? It isn’t difficult to do so standing at the foot of Mount Everest or seeing the Grand Canyon. You do not have to be very religious or even religious at all, to feel awe in the presence of the sublime.”

When I read those questions I thought about one of my favorite songs, written and performed by Judy Collins, from her Whales and Nightingales album. The lyrics to the song, “Nightingale II,” tell us about a man who somehow or another missed the presence of God when it should have been very obvious. Here are the lyrics:

*Jacob's heart bent with fear
like a bow with death for its arrow
In Vain he searched for the final
truth
to set his soul free of doubt*

*Over the mountains he walked
with his head bent searching for
reasons
Then he called out to God for help
and climbed to the top of a hill*

Continued —

Continued —



*Wind swept the sunlight through the wheat fields
In the orchard the nightingale sang
while the plums that she broke with her brown beak
tomorrow would turn in to songs*

*Then she flew up through the rain
with the sun silver bright on her feathers
Jacob put back his frowns and sighed
and walked back down the hill*

*God doesn't answer me
and He never will*

Terumah in a Nutshell

Exodus 25:1–27:19

Below is this week's Parshah in a Nutshell from chabad.org.

The people of Israel are called upon to contribute thirteen materials—gold, silver and copper; blue-, purple- and red-dyed wool; flax, goat hair, animal skins, wood, olive oil, spices and gems—out of which, G-d says to Moses, “They shall make for Me a Sanctuary, and I shall dwell amidst them.”



On the summit of Mount Sinai, Moses is given detailed instructions on how to construct this dwelling for G-d so that it could be readily dismantled, transported and reassembled as the people journeyed in the desert.

In the Sanctuary's inner chamber, behind an artistically woven curtain, was the ark containing the tablets of testimony engraved with the Ten Commandments; on the ark's cover stood two winged cherubim hammered out of pure gold. In the outer chamber stood the seven-branched menorah, and the table upon which the “showbread” was arranged.

The Sanctuary's three walls were fitted together from 48 upright wooden boards, each of which was overlaid with gold and held up by a pair of silver foundation sockets. The roof was formed of three layers of coverings: (a) tapestries of multicolored wool and linen; (b) a covering made of goat hair; (c) a covering of ram and tachash skins. Across the front of the Sanctuary was an embroidered screen held up by five posts.

Surrounding the Sanctuary and the copper-plated altar which fronted it was an enclosure of linen hangings, supported by 60 wooden posts with silver hooks and trimmings, and reinforced by copper stakes.

A User's Manual?

The Parshah in a Nutshell for Terumah talks about the construction of the Mishkan, the Sanctuary that the Children of Israel were instructed to build so that God could dwell among them on their journey from Mt. Sinai, after the incident of the Golden Calf, to the Promised Land, a journey that would eventually last for forty years.

A first reading of the parshah is not terribly exciting. There are no stories of creation, or a great flood, or plagues upon Egypt, or the parting of the Red Sea. Instead, there are detailed instructions on how to construct the Mishkin.

Now I don't know about you, but reading an instruction manual was never all that interesting to me. But wait, there is much, much more. to this parshah.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks tells us in the following article from *israelseen.com*, the parshah is also very much about giving. It is about God giving to the people and the people giving back to God. And that is why Terumah is much more than a set of instructions on how to construct a Mishkin.

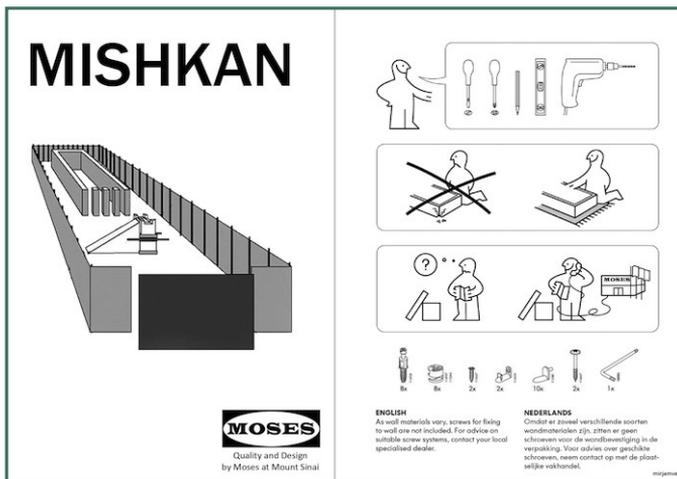
Jonathan Sacks

The Gift of Giving: Terumah

It was the first Israelite house of worship, the first home Jews made for God. But the very idea is fraught with paradox, even contradiction. How can you build a house for God? He is bigger than anything we can imagine, let alone build.

King Solomon made this point when he inaugurated another house of God, the First Temple: "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain You. How much less this house I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). So did Isaiah in the name of God himself: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What house can you build for me? Where will my resting place be? (Is. 66:1).

Not only does it seem impossible to build a home for God. It should be unnecessary. The God of everywhere can be accessed anywhere, as readily in the deepest pit as on the highest mountain, in a city slum as in a palace lined with marble and gold.



The answer, and it is fundamental, is that God does not live in buildings. He lives in builders. He lives not in structures of stone but in the human heart. What the Jewish sages and mystics pointed out was that in our parsha God says, “Let them build me a sanctuary that I may dwell in them” (Ex. 25:8), not “that I may dwell in it.”

Why then did God command the people to make a sanctuary at all? The answer given by most commentators, and hinted at by the Torah itself, is that God gave the command specifically after the sin of the golden calf.

The people made the calf after Moses had been on the mountain for forty days to receive the Torah. So long as Moses was in their midst, the people knew that he communicated with God, and God with him, and therefore God was accessible, close. But when he was absent for nearly six weeks, they panicked. Who else could bridge the gap between the people and God? How could they hear God’s instructions? Through what intermediary could they make contact with the divine presence?

That is why God said to Moses, “Let them build me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.” The key word here is the verb *sh-kh-n*, to dwell. Never before had it been used in connection with God. It eventually became a keyword of Judaism itself. From it came the word *Mishkan* meaning a sanctuary, and *Shekhinah*, the divine presence.

Central to its meaning is the idea of closeness. *Shakhen* in Hebrew means a neighbour, the person who lives next door. What the Israelites needed and what God gave them was a way of feeling as close to God as to our next-door neighbour.

That is what the patriarchs and matriarchs had. God spoke to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah intimately, like a friend. He told Abraham and Sarah that they would have a child. He explained to Rebecca why she was suffering such acute pain in pregnancy. He appeared to Jacob at key moments in his life telling him not to be afraid.



That is not what the Israelites had experienced until now. They had seen God bringing plagues on the Egyptians. They had seen Him divide the sea. They had seen Him send manna from heaven and water from a rock. They had heard His commanding voice at Mount Sinai and found it almost unbearable. They said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.” God had appeared to them as an overwhelming presence, an irresistible force, a light so

bright that to look at it makes you blind, a voice so strong it makes you go deaf.

So for God to be accessible, not just to the pioneers of faith – the patriarchs and matriarchs – but to every member of a large nation, was a challenge, as it were, for God Himself. He had to do what the Jewish mystics called *tzimtzum*, “contract” Himself, screen His light, soften His voice, hide His glory within a thick cloud, and allow the infinite to take on the dimensions of the finite.

But that, as it were, was the easy part. The difficult part had nothing to do with God and everything to do with us. How do we come to sense the presence of God? It isn't difficult to do so standing at the foot of Mount Everest or seeing the Grand Canyon. You do not have to be very religious or even religious at all, to feel awe in the presence of the sublime. The psychologist Abraham Maslow, whom we encountered a few weeks ago in these pages, spoke about "peak experiences", and saw them as the essence of the spiritual encounter.

But how do you feel the presence of God in the midst of everyday life? Not from the top of Mount Sinai but from the plain beneath? Not when it is surrounded by thunder and lightning as it was at the great revelation, but when it is just a day among days?

That is the life-transforming secret of the name of the parsha, Terumah. It means "a contribution". God said to Moses: "Tell the Israelites to take for me a contribution. You are to receive the contribution for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give." (Ex. 25:2) The best way of encountering God is to give.

The very act of giving flows from, or leads to, the understanding that what we give is part of what we were given. It is a way of giving thanks, an act of gratitude. That is the difference in the human mind between the presence of God and the absence of God.

If God is present, it means that what we have is His. He created the universe. He made us. He gave us life. He breathed into us the very air we breathe. All around us is the majesty, the plenitude, of God's generosity: the light of the sun, the gold of the stone, the green of the leaves, the song of the birds. This is what we feel reading the great creation psalms we read every day in the morning service. The world is God's art gallery and His masterpieces are everywhere.

When life is a given, you acknowledge this by giving back.

But if life is not a given because there is no Giver, if the universe came into existence only because of a random fluctuation in the quantum field, if there is nothing in the universe that knows we exist, if there is nothing to the human body but a string of letters in the genetic code and to the human mind but electrical impulses in the brain, if our moral convictions are self-serving means of self-preservation and our spiritual aspirations mere delusions, then it is difficult to feel gratitude for the gift of life. There is no gift if there is no giver. There is only a



If the children of Israel were asked today...



series of meaningless accidents, and it is difficult to feel gratitude for an accident.

The Torah therefore tells us something simple and practical. Give, and you will come to see life as a gift. You don't need to be able to prove God exists. All you need is to be thankful that you exist – and the rest will follow.

That is how God came to be close to the Israelites through the building of the sanctuary. It wasn't the quality of the wood and metals and drapes. It wasn't the glitter of jewels on the breastplate of the High Priest. It wasn't the beauty of the architecture or the smell of the sacrifices. It was the fact that it was built out of the gifts of

“everyone whose heart prompts them to give” (Ex. 25:2). Where people give voluntarily to one another and to holy causes, that is where the divine presence rests.

Hence the special word that gives its name to this week's parsha: Terumah. I've translated it as “a contribution” but it actually has a subtly different meaning for which there is no simple English equivalent. It means “something you lift up” by dedicating it to a sacred cause. You lift it up, then it lifts you up. The best way of scaling the spiritual heights is simply to give in gratitude for the fact that you have been given.

God doesn't live in a house of stone. He lives in the hearts of those who give.



In Memorium

The Carnegie Shul extends condolences to the families of:

Maxine Brunwasser

Maxine her late husband, Albert Brunwasser, were longtime members and supporters of the Carnegie Shul. Her obituary appears <https://jewishchronicle.timesofisrael.com/maxine-slavovskyy-brunwasser/>.

Richard B. Kelson

Brother of Sharon Block, the wife of our president, Dr. Larry Block. His obituary appears <https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/new-york-ny/richard-kelson-10054947>.

May their memories be for a blessing and may their families find comfort among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.