



Returning to the Wilderness, Building Together
Shabbat Terumah 5778 - February 16, 2018
Rabbi Dara Frimmer

This week's Torah portion, Terumah, is dedicated to the building of sacred space. Known as the Mishkan or the Tabernacle, this parsha focuses on the prototype for the Temple that was first built as our ancestors wandered in the desert. In Terumah we learn how it was built. We learn of our ancestors' contributions, all that they offered to bring. And we learn of God's promise, that, "If you build it, I will come. I will dwell there."

What more could we ask for this week as we struggle to make sense of our world? Perhaps here, in this week's portion, we have been given an ancient blueprint that might help to heal our fractured society and broken hearts. Here might be a way to build together and welcome in the presence of God.

And yet, before we jump into building, the Torah stops to teach us about Shabbat. Rabbinic commentary suggests the two sections are connected – the rules for Shabbat and the building of the Mishkan. Before we build, let's pause and reflect. Let's evaluate our resources, notice our fellow builders. How will we know what to build if we do not stop to consider what we already have and where we want to go?

Both ideas may guide us tonight as we try to make sense of this week.

First, the blueprint.

Rabbi Larry Hoffman writes:

If you are a synagogue president, professional fund-raiser or Federation campaign chair...get [ready to] check out the first-ever capital campaign in Jewish history. Here's the thing: everyone gave. We are not talking 50% of the population (wishful thinking), or 80% (a crazy dream), or even 95% (a virtual hallucination), but 100% — every single soul who left Egypt. All of this without a women's division or special drives for lawyers, dentists, and accountants; and not even one award dinner. It came from men and women without a single bank account, share of common stock, charitable trust, or need for a tax write-off. They just gave — because they wanted to.

The Torah is clear on this, and so is Midrash Rabbah which says explicitly that everyone responded: not just those who with possessions set aside from Egypt, but even people who had saved little, if anything, but who scraped together at least something for the desert tabernacle. The absolutely destitute, says Rab Nachman of Bratslav, donated their best intentions within, and according to the Chatam Sofer, if the wealthy had tried to give it all, so as to save the poor their share, they wouldn't have been allowed to, since this was truly a project for all of Israel.¹

How beautiful is this image of giving, generosity and communal building? It's hard to imagine Jews agreeing on anything — but they did. Why? Commentators suggest that God was at the center of the building. God said, "build me a sanctuary and I'll show up." What more could a people ask for?

Vertical vs. horizontal motivators.

The love and fear of God may have been a driving factor — I'll call that the vertical motivator. But I would argue there was also a horizontal motivator. The love felt between the Israelites and their shared commitment to becoming a people (not just a disparate group of slaves) provided additional incentive. Here was a proactive moment in their journey. Not passively receiving revelation, but, actively bringing forward materials and building something that could contain holiness.

Years ago, in our work with One LA, we had been pushing for training on race and class. We knew as white, upper class Jews working with the members of Latino churches we had some learning to do about how to talk to one another and how to partner together. The organizer was sympathetic, but refused to give a lecture on race/class to a captive audience of Isaian. "Do the work with the parishioners at La Placita and St. Agnus," he said, "and I promise you, you'll learn how to talk and build something holy together."

And, what do they say about that first car trip or vacation a young couple takes together...? "You'll know if you can spend your life with him/her if you can survive a weekend away."

We learn by doing. By jumping in. By figuring it out as we go — and, if needed, by being willing to fail. We learn and we grow and we discover holiness when we partner together on a project that is bigger than our own needs. A shared vision. A collective action.

¹ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/sacred-giving/>

It's been clear for a long time, but especially this week, Americans are desperately in need of a shared building project for our nation today.

Check, please.

This week, 17 people were murdered at a high school in Florida. And, predictably, the nation has once again divided into camps: the anti-gun and sensible gun legislation advocates blaming the NRA; the gun lobby blaming mental illness; the public schools and clinics blaming the lack of funds. It's been 48 hours and we're busy building up our arsenal of words. We are building up our walls to go into battle against our political enemies. We are building...but nothing that brings us together. No holy site will emerge.

This week, efforts to pass a clean Dream Act were rejected by the Senate: a cohort of leaders steeped in decades of animosity and discord. A tone was set when politicians gave up "mutual toleration" and instead saw their political opponents as un-American, immoral, and unworthy of being treated with common decency. Rather than join together with a shared purpose and goal, they, and by extension we, retreat to our political corners, turn on Fox or MSNBC, and post articles on Facebook to a list of people who think as we do.

Refusing to build together does not only prevent a building from being erected – it changes how we see the land before us, the resources we have, and the people who exist within it. Take immigration as only the latest example: Are immigrants today just like our great grandparents: hard working, ready to pay taxes and people who truly love America? Or, are they gang members and potential terrorists, who are violent, dishonest and likely to steal our jobs? There is no time to listen to immigrant stories – to find out who they are and what they dream of. There is only time to dig in to the story you already know and build according to the blueprint you already have.²

Sorted not sordid.

Today, we are more comfortable building with people who think, act and vote just like us. Perhaps you've heard, we are the most sorted we've ever been. We may not even do Thanksgiving with "those" relatives anymore for fear of starting a political fight.

As much as we need those partisan building projects to assure us that our values will not be forgotten or obliterated, we are also reifying the divide. They dig in their heels. We dig in ours. And, so, we are building different cities. Different states. We talk about living in 2 different nations. Our visions seem impossible to align.

² Thank you to Lee Winkleman of Reform CA for our recent conversation on immigration.

The authors of *How Democracies Die*³ posit that in times of tumult, when we are threatened by autocratic leaders who might undo centuries of democratic traditions, the solution is for the political parties to forgo their independent concerns and join together in the shared project of protecting the nation. Build something bigger than yourself. Create the space in which holiness might dwell. A space to hold us all.

We are desperately in need of a shared building project today.

Inextricably bound.

Brene Brown's newest book, *Braving the Wildernes: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*⁴, reminds us that while we love humankind...we hate people. And that's too bad. We are committed to the *idea* of humanity but we don't actually want to do the work of getting to know one another. To having tough conversations, being curious and seeking to understand...rather than shout over, belittle or convince someone she's wrong.

Yet, we seem to be working against our self-interest. We know, deep down, that human connection is the ultimate source of strength. It is what picks us up and holds us up, especially as we move through trauma and crisis. Moreover, it is the gift we can offer others – a gift we can give with a full and generous heart that helps us find our purpose as we muddle through life.

The moment we reveal the hidden lines of connection between us is the moment we are certain that there is a good and compassionate God – a God who was just waiting for us to realize that the Divine plan was always about love, strength and support.

Yet, knowing this, even as observant Reform Jews who talk about this all the time, we still choose isolation, or, islands of likeminded people. We retreat, especially when we are afraid or in pain. We demonize and degrade the other, even as we claim that they demonize and degrade us.

That can't be the final answer.

Adar is coming.

Meanwhile, it's Rosh Hodesh Adar (yesterday and today) and our Jewish calendar, regardless of the tragedy we are experiencing at this season, is asking us to look ahead to a month that might be filled with miracles. The Talmud tells us that "when the month of Adar arrives, we increase in joy." Why joy? Because we anticipate welcoming "a season filled with miracles." *It is the anticipation of what has yet to come that should enliven us.*

Now, "Jewish logic" is a funny thing. "Jewish logic," if you will, says that if something happened once upon a time, a long time ago, it's likely (if it's going to happen again) to occur at the same

³ <https://www.amazon.com/How-Democracies-Die-Steven-Levitsky/dp/1524762938>

⁴ <https://www.amazon.com/Braving-Wilderness-Quest-Belonging-Courage/dp/0812995848>

time of year. For example, we stay up late on Shavuot each year, studying throughout the night, because we are taught that revelation took place at Mt. Sinai thousands of years earlier on the 6th of Sivan (which is Shavuot): So, nu? Why should revelation not happen again, thousands of years later, on the same night? So, too, with Purim and the month of Adar: Our ancestors were miraculously saved from annihilation in the month of Adar: decrees were reversed and fortunes revealed. So why should it not happen again this coming month?

I wonder, after a week like this, what joy we might find in the days and weeks to come. What miracles might we anticipate? I wonder if the building of the Mishkan, a *shared* building project, and the story of a people committed to one another as they wander through the wilderness might guide us. I wonder if this knowledge, that we are inextricably connected, even when we feel a gulf between us, might be the way we uncover miracles this month. Perhaps this month we discover hidden strength and (re)learn how to make space for God's love, presence, protection and guidance...even when we have not had a shared building project in generations.

As Adar enters, with its demand for joy and miracles, I hear echoes from the past push forward, past my own sadness and skepticism.

Can I tell you the story of how our grandparents celebrated Purim in the ghettos and concentration camps?⁵ Children who dressed up and performed plays. Men who chanted megillah from memory. What gave them the strength to do so? Faith in God? Certainly. Faith and love and devotion to one another? Definitely. There was a shared commitment to building something bigger than themselves, and, bigger than the moment in which they were living. A commitment to fill the darkness with light and to look at destruction and say, "even in this space, we will build something holy."

Can I tell you the ways the bereaved parents of Newtown, CT, have honored their children and lifted up their memories as a blessing? There is a sign that welcomes you into their city that says, "We are Sandy Hook. We choose love." What gives them the strength to get out of bed each morning, to see their children's photos on the wall, frozen in time, and to greet us, *the stranger*, with words of love? They do it because they are committed to building something beyond their pain. They are reaching out for your hand and inviting you to see their blueprint for building holy space, saying, 'You, who I do not know, but who I sense I am deeply connected to in some ancient and immutable way...build something new and beautiful with me.' Build this world with love.

What miracles might we find as we enter Adar? Let's start by looking to one another and trying to create a new blueprint of what we might build together.

Bring what you have.

The Torah is clear – bring what you can and bring it with an open heart. The rich can't sponsor it all. The poor are not exempt. Everyone is needed. Every offering is desired.

⁵ <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/through-the-lens/purim.asp>

What is it that we are truly asked to do by building a tent in the wilderness? We're learning to construct something sacred out of nothing. We are taking scraps of cloth and broken jewels and threads and tatters, and we are bringing it to the center of our community and we are saying, "Can this, too, become holy?"

We are bringing broken hearts. Souls that are defeated. Hands that feel impotent and unskilled. Nevertheless, we are showing up in the wilderness and we are offering ourselves as builders: "Do I have anything of use to help build something holy with you? Something that will last even as we continue to travel through the uncertain wilderness?"

And God's answer is resoundingly, "Yes. Build me that sanctuary. Build it with whatever you have and build it together, and I will dwell within it."

"But listen," God whispers from in between all those lines of instructions and materials: *"You must learn to build it together."*

May this blueprint from our ancestors, this blueprint for holy space built by a community of disparate souls, bring us together, even today, and reveal the invisible and inextricable lines that connect us all.

May this celebration of Shabbat, from ancient times to modern, continue to give us the space to reflect and to reframe, and to gather the strength with need to continue building tomorrow.

Shabbat Shalom.