



Building (Again)

Shabbat Vayakhel-Pekudei 5778 – March 9, 2018
Rabbi Dara Frimmer

This week, we return to the building of the Tabernacle. In these final *parshiyot* of Exodus, we receive the blueprint and line by line instructions for constructing walls, altars and priestly garments. Last Shabbat, we paused to retell the story of the Golden Calf. And, now, we are back to building - as if the Israelites had never before been asked to build. Same instructions. But... slightly different.

It's interesting to note that the Torah chooses not to call attention to this colossal repetition of building instructions and materials. For example, Moses does not say, "Listen, now that we're past that whole idolatry moment in our lives, I'd like to remind you what God actually asked you to build... So, nu? Pay attention this time." Nor does he own the moment of repetition as a pedagogic tool, "All right, folks. I know this is repetitive, but I need you to know how important this building project is for you and for God."

What for some readers and listeners may become a tiresome repetition of pegs and poles, acacia wood and copper bowls, becomes, for others, an opportunity to increase curiosity and questions. If the Torah was not explicit as to why it chose to repeat, then perhaps it is upon us to discover the hidden meaning.

Repetition makes us better.

As Moses calls the Israelite community together (again) teaching them first about Shabbat (again) and then inviting them to bring forward gifts to Adonai, Moses is clear (again) to emphasize that gifts should come from everyone whose heart so moves him, "*kol nediv leebo*". First invited to be generous in Parashat Terumah, the Israelites are once again asked to come forward with their offerings in Parashat Vayakhel: two *particular* instances of giving that (eventually) help to construct a 19th century Mussar practice dedicated to *nedivut* – the Hebrew word for generosity.

However, rather than lift up one time acts of generosity, (no matter how significant), the Mussar movement chooses to reward repetition:

Our Sages of blessed memory have stated further that the trait of generosity resides in habit, one not being truly generous until s/he is accustomed to giving as much as s/he can at all times. For one who gives a

thousand gold pieces to a deserving person at one time is not so generous as one who gives out a thousand gold pieces over a span of a thousand times.¹

The Lithuanian Mussar rabbis of the 19th century have laid down a challenge: The ideal practice is not to give once. It is to create a habit of giving: i.e. \$1000 given all at once, at one time, is worth less than giving \$1 a day for 1000 days.

For these rabbis, the goal is not the gift. The goal is the practice. And, perhaps, based on the repetition of this week's portion, the same might be said of the Mishkan: The goal is not the building, it's the repeated ritual of giving.

According to this model, who stands to benefit the most from building the Mishkan? (It's not God.) Who reaps the true reward from 1000 days of consistent, repetitive giving? (It's not the recipient of the money, though certainly that's important.) It's you. The practice of building and giving are meant to strengthen you.

Malcolm Gladwell made himself famous (again) in 2014 when he published *Outliers* and argued that that 10,000 hours of "deliberate practice" can make you a star in any field. While studies have come to challenge that premise, it was a captivating argument because it resonated with so many of our life experiences. When we repeat something enough times, we get better at it.

10,000 hours of piano. 10,000 swings of the golf club. 10,000 days of giving one dollar a day?
Repetition just might make us better.

Kol nediv leebo, every day.

Learning to give, and to give generously, is a skill best achieved through ongoing practice. As a society, we are consumed by the strengthening routines of Cross Fit and Soul Cycle. We seem to have far fewer programs that invite us to strengthen our capacity to give without fear of scarcity, exhaustion or judgment. Perhaps that is what Shabbat was always meant to be: our community's training ground for building up the muscles of our heart and hands.

As Reform Jews, we are asked to give not just money but also our energy, our time, our commitment to making this world a more just, compassionate and sustainable place for all who dwell within it. And, let's be honest, we're asked to do it *all the time*. We are asked to give and repair and build and love not just once or twice a year, but every day.

However, rather than see each request as an opportunity to practice giving, to repeat for the sake of improving, or to test out our capacity to grow and change...we often decline to engage. We don't have the time. We don't know enough. We don't want to fail. We've decided our efforts won't matter in the end. We'd prefer (if given the choice) to just give once.

Naomi Klein, an accomplished writer and activist, admits that for many years, she exempted herself from the conversation on climate change. In her book, This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate, she writes:

"I denied climate change for longer than I care to admit. I knew it was happening, sure...But I stayed pretty hazy on the details and only skimmed most of the news stories, especially the really scary ones. I told myself the science was too complicated and that the environmentalists were dealing with it. And I continued to behave as if there was nothing wrong with the shiny card in my wallet attesting to my "elite" frequent flyer status. [...] A great many of us engage in this kind of *climate change denial*. We look for a split second and then we look away... Or maybe we do look – really look – but then, inevitably, we seem to forget."²

¹ The Ways of the Tzaddikim: Orchoth Tzaddikim, trans. Benzion Sobel (Feldheim: 1996), p. 311. Orchoth Tzaddikim, originally named Sefer Ha-Middot by the anonymous author, a book of Jewish ethical teachings written in Germany in the Middle Ages (c.1400 - c.1500 CE) Thanks to Rabbi Marc Margolius for the reference.

² Naomi Klein, This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate, https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00JHIDON6/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btcr=1

So, here are the instructions, again.

Perhaps, this week, Moses repeats every verse because the Israelites have, in fact, forgotten. Perhaps, they looked away too long and were distracted by something shiny.

Perhaps the project of building God's home seemed too overwhelming, or maybe they could tell, even from the initial set of directions, that this wasn't a one-time ask -- that they would be reminded every day of God's expectation to build and rebuild structures that would be appropriate and fitting to host the Holy Blessed One. In other words, to build, daily, a world that reflects God's commandment to see the face of the Divine on every human being. To protect the most vulnerable. To watch over the Earth and its inhabitants... Not just once or even twice. But every day.

Understandably, maybe they asked to take a break. Maybe they thought what they could give wouldn't be enough, so it wasn't worth giving at all. So, God calls them back. "Let's try this, again."

It is no small task to build a space in which God can dwell. It is a lifetime of commitment to thoughtful construction and contributions.

It is no small task to imagine changing a global economy built on production and consumption, driven by the belief that more is better, and that collateral damage to the environment is a natural byproduct of innovation. It requires many, many more of us to commit to a lifetime of learning and activism as we work to (re)build our world.

On this Shabbat of Repetition, let us draw wisdom, strength and comfort from our ancestors who were called on to return so they might learn (again) to build together. From those who showed up to contribute in spite of their fears and insufficiencies. And from those who learned to give generously through repetition. May we also find ourselves returning and learning to give - once again.

Shabbat Shalom.