

Eitan Yahrzeit dvar 2017 3.2.17 Shacharit

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This week's parsha, Trumah, follows last week's, Mishpatim, which contains a series of commandments, largely on how people should behave toward one another. At the end of those instructions, the Israelites experience a powerful visual presence of God, in Exodus 24:17

יז וּמְרֵאָה כְּבוֹד יְהוָה,
כְּאִשׁ אֹכֶלֶת בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר,
לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. 17 And the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the eyes of the children of Israel.

Then Moshe, their leader, disappears into this cloud of smoke and fire for 40 days. Now, God gives Moshe instructions that are a stark contrast to the behavioral mitzvot, commandments God has just given the Israelites. These are all about how they should construct the portable temple, something seemingly superficial compared with how people should treat people. Trumah begins

ב דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְיִקְחוּ-לִי תְרוּמָה:
מֵאֵת כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְבְּנוּ לְבוֹ, תִּקְחוּ אֶת-תְּרוּמָתִי. 2 'Speak to the children of Israel, that they take for Me an offering; of every man whose heart makes him willing you shall take My offering.

The willing, open heart, can make one receptive, not only to detailed instructions, but to feeling a connection with God. The verses that follow start to go into that detail:

3 And this is the offering which ye shall take of them: gold, and silver, and brass;
4 and blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen, and goats' hair;
5 and rams' skins dyed red, and sealskins, and acacia-wood, etc., etc.

Then, verse 8

ח וַעֲשׂוּ לִי, מִקִּדָּשׁ; וְשִׁכְנֹתַי,
בְּתוֹכָם. 8 And make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.

This is the simplest sentence in the entire chapter 25. Every other verse is instructional.

But these five words in Hebrew are the most important of this chapter, and of the instructions that flow through the entire Trumah parsha that goes into all the detail

17 And thou shalt make an ark-cover of pure gold: two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof.

Make Me a Sanctuary that I may Dwell among THEM. The important part of the Sanctuary, God is saying, sanctify me, and I will be in them. God doesn't say I will be in IT – in the place that has all these elaborate decorations. Rather, God is saying, by offering your heart to me, I will be with you.

So why give the elaborate instructions for accoutrements, if all God really needs is our simple devotion?

This makes me think of the activities I did right after my son Eitan left four years ago. How could I function in the face of this immense loss? I felt driven to do something to honor him, to keep his presence close to me. To build something. And I did.

I helped build and create his tribute website, I petitioned and planned for the park in Cambridge dedicated to his memory, I designed and arranged for the unveiling of his headstone. Giving myself “assignments” during the time of intense raw grief helped give a focus to day to day functioning. Having a focus gave me strength, and calm.

And I think that's what God is doing here. The Israelites have just been given the Ten Commandments, and all the laws in Mishpatim, but they're also still suffering from the shock of freedom, of immense change. Free, yes, but no longer part of the only world they had ever known. And God saw the fear they felt when he recently appeared to them and gave them all those interpersonal laws to follow.

And now, as they're processing living with first-hand miracles, with a God who talks directly to their leader, who manifests Godself to them in the form of manna, pillars of clouds and fire, God recognizes that they need time to understand, so he gives them an assignment. To build. Which is something they know how to do. It's a unifying activity. And I think God is also anticipating the upcoming sin of the golden calf – the “meanwhile” that is happening while Moshe is up on the mountain. While God plans to dwell among them the PEOPLE, not IT, the tabernacle, God knows that the Israelites will need some kind of physical structure to focus their worship.

God bookends the instructions for the portable sanctuary with a sentence that parallels the earlier one, four chapters later, in Exodus 29:45

**מה וְשִׁכְנֹתִי, בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל;
וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם, לֵאלֹהִים.** 45 And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God.

Again, God promises to dwell among the people, not merely in the sanctified place. And the people as a community. The rituals we do – and need to do, like wearing a tallit, or tefilin, saying tefilot, coming together as a community to support those saying kaddish for a loved one gone, these all help provide a framework for our own focus, help open our hearts to be receptive to feeling God, even during challenging and seemingly impossible times.