

Vayakhel-Pekudei 5780

This week, in our double portion of Vayakhel-Pekudei, we continue to read about the construction of the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle. We spent the last two and a half weeks reading about the instructions, and, now, we see the actual construction. Despite the fact that the *Mishkan* was built in this week's portion exactly as it was commanded in the previous weeks' portions, we are often still surprised to hear every detail listed again. Where the verbs were all injunctives before ("They shall make..."), the verbs are now all in the past tense ("They made..."). The result that we reach finally at the end of Pekudei is a sanctuary that is ready for use. It and the priesthood are eventually consecrated in Shemini, the third portion of the book of Leviticus.

So what do we do with this sanctuary? And in our world, where animal sacrifice is a thing of the past, and which many of us do not want to see restored, what is the value of this sanctuary? I argued a few weeks ago, when we read Terumah, that the purpose of the *Mishkan* is for God to dwell among us, and that God's dwelling among us is a way of describing the communal bonds that hold us – or any community – together. By strengthening the bonds, we strengthen God's presence among us, but if we threaten our community by excluding people, we push God out of our experience.

I had wanted to explore with you this week the question of the value of a physical sanctuary. In our synagogue building, we have two rooms primarily designated as holy spaces. These rooms are gorgeous spaces architecturally, with soaring ceilings, beautiful stained-glass windows that cast exquisite colored light across the rooms. In each room, we store our most prized possessions in the *aron kodesh*, the holy ark. We call a synagogue – or at least some synagogues – *Beth Elohim* or *Beth El*, 'the House of God' because they are the place where we expect to encounter God. OK, perhaps many of us are not in the frame of mind to *expect* to encounter God, but at least for most of us, we hold that in the sanctuary we are at least as likely as anywhere else to have such a moment.

Consider how we decorate the sanctuary. We put beautiful flowers on the *bimah*. We dress the Torah scrolls in fine mantles and silver. We tend to dress ourselves in our fine clothing when we spend time in the sanctuary, and we try to conduct ourselves with a higher level of decorum than how we behave in the rest of our lives. The space is holy, sacred.

As we all know, we are in a strange moment in our lives where we are kept physically apart from our community and our sanctuary. Rabbi Haaz has compared this crisis to another in our people's history: the two destructions of the Temple. Our people survived each of these catastrophes by adapting. After the Second Temple was destroyed, we could no longer offer animal sacrifices in our Temple, we developed new ways to sacrifice: our spiritual energy in prayer, our physical energy in acts of *hesed* or kindness, and our money in tzedakah. In this crisis, we have lost access not only to our holy space, but also to other people. What has this done to us, and how will we adapt?

“Social Distancing” is a misnomer. As was pointed out to me recently, the policies espoused by our public health experts and our political leaders are about *physical* distancing. With physical distance, it is easy to fall into social distance. (As I have been joking recently, from social distance develops *anti-social* distance.) On the other hand, we should be fighting tooth and nail to maintain social proximity. But how? One upshot of our contemporary technological zeitgeist is that we have at our disposal numerous ways to keep in touch with people who are not physically in our locations. I do not need to fill this space with the names of the various tools. Not only can we use these software platforms for individual contact but also for maintaining community. This week, members of the Har Zion staff have begun teaching classes online through Zoom. We have even been maintaining our morning and evening prayer services and projecting them into your homes via Zoom and LiveStream.

At the same time, schools of all levels – from elementary to university and including our own JFGRS – have moved online too. Classes are conducted through one of these group conferencing platforms, assignments are submitted and graded online. (Okay, that last part had been going on already a decade!) It would seem that we will all survive.

About a decade ago, studies began to emerge questioning the efficacy of social networks. We had more “friends” than ever before, but were we truly connected to them? Does a robust life online correlate to a robust social life IRL – in real life – or a life well lived? It is amazing what we can do these days, but a social life in the virtual world is not a substitute for one in the actual world.

Among our health professionals there are a wide variety of estimates about how long this pandemic will keep us apart. Some say it will last a long time and some say a *very* long time: I am certainly no expert that I should be able to choose among these estimates. What I am confident of, however, is that it *will* end. But then what? As humans, we have a tendency to become comfortable with the easy way. Consider, for example, what email has done to the process of *Teshuva* or repentance that we engage in each year in preparation for Yom Kippur. Where once people would go around to everyone they knew and attempt to make amends for whatever they had done wrong, now we send a mass email – all at once – to everyone we know apologizing for anything we may have done wrong. It is easier: it requires far less time and energy, and we do not even need to worry about how we wronged each person.

In the present situation, we have been forced away from all kinds of social institutions: schools, synagogues and churches, restaurants, retail stores, and so many more. We have fallen back on the Internet to handle as much of this as we can. And *Barukh HaShem* - thank God – we have these options! What would life be if we were all in this near quarantine (or actual quarantine for some) but we did not have Zoom, FaceTime, Skype, LiveStream, and the others?

(Once we learn the technology) We may find that meeting over Zoom is easier than driving to your meeting in person. Going to school over Zoom is easier than sitting in

class. We can wear pajama pants; we can walk away more easily, zone out, turn off our microphones or our cameras, and who will be the wiser? There is less obligation when we are communicating remotely. Over time, all of this will seem normal. Because it is easier, will we choose to continue this when the present crisis subsides?

We must resist the comfort that our solutions provide us. We must reject them as the new normal. They may be easier, but easier is not always better. We must ache for human contact, for the togetherness of actually being in the same room. We must yearn to return to our schools because learning in person has better outcomes for both teacher and student.

- to return to our restaurants – because it is good to leave our homes every so often.
- to return to our retail outlets – not by shopping online, but by walking in the doors.
- to return to our friends, to give them hugs, handshakes, and to see in them and to let them see the fullness of our expressions in real time.
- to return to our synagogue, not by praying over Zoom, but by standing in our sanctuaries to pray and sing together and to study Torah and hear it chanted in person.
- to stand together before God in our holy space, in the place that inspires us with its beauty and grandeur.

At the end of each seder, we recite the line *L'shana haba'a birushalayim*, Next year in Jerusalem. Since the destruction of the Temple, we have had a longing. We may not wish to restore animal sacrifices, but we know that something about what we do now is not the ideal. Our world is broken, and we want to repair it. During the disorder and disruption caused by Covid-19, we similarly feel like the world is broken, and we want to see it repaired. Even while we scramble to get by as best we can, it is helpful, it is valuable to continue to seek that restoration.

May we all make it through this crisis in health and well-being. May the medical, economic, and social impacts be smaller than we fear. May we survive this the way we Jews have survived destructions, wars, plagues, pogroms, and persecution over two thousand years: by adapting, while holding on tightly to each other with love and while holding onto Torah.