

Sermon Parashat T'rumah 5767

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Rabbi Jay M. Stein

When I was in grammar school I went to a small Yeshiva. Unfortunately, that school only went up to the 8th grade and therefore, after graduation, I went into public high school. I went from a school of maybe 70 children to having a class of 250 children. There were more children in my homeroom than in the four grades of my grammar school. So, like many of my peers, I got involved in USY to have a stronger connection to the Jewish world. It was there I met Michael Charlip. He was a Jewish boy who had always gone to public school. He was about 6 inches taller than I. We quickly became great friends – much like the Skipper and Gilligan from Gilligan's Island. It turned out that Michael went to my high school. Michael and I were very close, but as the years went by he went one way and I went another. In our first years of college we worked hard and kept the friendship alive, even though his life direction was completely different than mine. Eventually, Michael dropped out of school and I went on to post graduate work. He started working as a bar tender and I got married. In fact, he was my best man even though we had already begun to lose contact. We always promised each other that when we got married the other would be the best man. So I kept the promise.

For the next number of years we had to work even harder. I would periodically make trips back to our hometown to see him, but I had moved on and he seemed not to. This created a distance that was difficult to overcome. He was easy to find because he was living in the same house and his phone number was the most used number I ever dialed in high school. My fingers could literally dial the number almost without thought. So much so, that it was difficult to remember the number without dialing it. Then one day I called his house and he was no longer there. I guess he moved – we never made contact and I lost his number. I know that cell phone numbers are portable now, but his home number is also gone. It's so sad that I have lost contact with him. Unfortunately, friendships though portable, are more difficult to maintain from a distance. Regular contact is really needed. I know there are friends with whom you can periodically check in and feel as though you haven't missed a day, but that's not the norm. For real connection there has to be regular conversations, there has to be proximity. There is nothing better than coming to services each week and sitting in the same seat, next to the same people. All you have to do is catch up; you don't have to start from scratch. You don't have to tell your entire story – you can just fill in a few details from the past week. That's what real friendship is like and that's the foundation of real community. In fact, in this morning's reading, though set in the *mishkan*, the traveling tabernacle is truly

a message about building, not just a physical building but about building an institution, a community. Read literally and metaphorically, this morning's reading is about building a holy structure – and we can do the same. This morning's reading gives us instruction on how to start building a community and it literally gives us a blueprint – we just have to learn how to read it.

Permit me to share one more detail or instruction. If we take this dictate seriously, we can change or build this *kehillah kedosha*, this holy community. We have dramatically similar language in two different verses. Look with me and I'll teach you how to read a blueprint. Please open your humash (the large red volume) to page 492 and 493. In this part of the reading that describes how to build the *mishkan*, the phrase "*karsei zahav*" is used in verse 6 and then "*karsei nichoshet*" is used in verse 11. *Karsei*, as you see from the English translation, are connectors. This was the way the posts were held together. In verse 6 they are made of gold, while in verse 11 they are made of copper. Each connector was used for bringing together different types of material. Interestingly, there were 50 connectors of gold and 50 connectors of copper. It took 100 connectors to bring together just two components of the entire project. In verse 6, the text states, "*v'haya ha mishkan echad*, so that the tabernacle becomes whole." and then verse 11 concludes "*v'chibarta et ha'ohel v'haya echad* - and couple the tent together so that it becomes whole." In both verses the result of connecting the pieces together is wholeness. By bringing the parts together it completes the project making it one entity. The sum is greater than the parts.

This is the project designed to create a whole. The parts brought together make one and this is true of the holy community we endeavor to preserve and maintain. The result is we build a community in which God can live. This is why the verse early in this morning's reading says, "*V'asu li mikdash v'shachanti bitochem*, build Me a tabernacle so that I might live among you." (Exodus 25:8) When we build a holy space, God lives with us. Our task is to build that holy space and that holy space is here – and the verses before us say it is to be a connector.

In a great book called, "The Tipping Point," Malcolm Gladwell describes an experiment that Stanley Milgram conducted in the 1960's. This experiment was conducted to see how information gets spread through a population. He got the names and addresses of 160 people who lived in Omaha, Nebraska and mailed each a packet. In the packet was the name and address of a stockbroker who worked in Boston and lived in Sharon, Massachusetts. Each person was instructed to write his or her name on the packet and send it to a friend or acquaintance that they thought might get the packet closer to the stockbroker. For example, if you lived in Omaha and had a cousin outside of Boston, you might send it to him on the grounds that even if your cousin did not himself know the stockbroker, he would be more likely to get the

packet to the stockbroker in two, three or four steps. The idea was that when the packet finally arrived at the stockbroker's house, Milgram could look at the list of people whose hands the package went through. He could then establish how close someone chosen at random was from one part of the country, to another person in another part of the country. Milgram found that most of the letters reached the stockbroker in five or six steps. This experiment is where we get the concept of "six degrees of separation."

It seems we are all connected – we just need to make the connections. My job is to connect this community to God; your job is to connect to each other. I need you to partner with me in bringing it all together and the example of the "packet" illustrates how each of us has a specific job to do.

The text teaches that there are different kinds of connectors, each functioning in their own way and doing their own job. Ibn Ezra remarks, "*kirsav nichoshet einam nir'im*, when the structure is finished the copper connectors can't even be seen." This text illustrates how the work of bringing people together isn't always a high profile job. It's not just about being an officer or a committee chairperson, maybe it's a quiet behind the scenes job. Maybe there is no public declaration; maybe it's a simple "Hello" a simple greeting. Be a greeter. Be a connector and connect people to this place.

Dr. Ron Wolfson explains exactly how to do this. In his book "The Spirituality of Welcoming," he explains the seven most important tips for greeting another human being:

- 1. Acknowledge the presence of the other.** Don't ignore anyone. Don't make anyone feel that they are less important than the conversation you are having, the task you are completing, or the other people in your life.
- 2. Approach people with an attitude of welcome.** Be enthusiastic and friendly. Make the first move. Have your body language match your words, make eye contact, maintain eye contact, smile, and nod or show empathy in some other way.
- 3. Greet the other.** In the synagogue, offer the appropriate greeting in addition to the usual "Hello, how are you?" Add: "Welcome," "Shabbat Shalom," the appropriate holiday greeting, or "Mazal Tov!" or "Congratulations." Also, when some people come to the congregation in mourning, greet them with "I'm sorry for your loss."

4. Offer assistance, guidance or directions. May I help you? What can I do for you? Let me show you to the child-care room. Don't point people down a hall laden with a complicated set of directions; offer to take them there.

5. Answer all questions with respect. There is no such thing as a stupid Jewish question. If you don't know the answer, promise to get the answer and then follow through.

6. Introduce new people to others. Build the community by connecting people who share a life stage, an affinity, or live in the same neighborhood.

7. Thank people for coming. The flip side of greeting is "waving," expressing gratitude to busy people for participating in the community.

I miss my dear friend, my best man. However, maybe there is another dear friend waiting to be met. Unfortunately, some friends come and some friends go. We find some people disappoint and some people exceed expectations. Some friends become deep and lasting while others fade away, but we cannot live without community so please join me. Take on this one task. Turn to a new person and offer them a piece of yourself, invite them to your home, give them a prayer book, trust your heart to them and ask that they trust their heart to you even if it's just for the time you are sitting here. Be genuine and engaging. Help us make this place so much more than it already is. I desperately want you to believe in God because I know it will make your life better. We can all believe in humanity even if it's in a world filled with so much cruelty and inhumane behavior. We need your help to build a place of safety and connection. You see, we can't afford to lose contact.