

Parashat Terumah 5781: The Place Where We Belong

R. Judah Kerbel ~ Queens Jewish Center

A beautiful, poignant song composed by [Abie Rotenberg](#) portrays a Sefer Torah written in the mid-19th century that was read from, embraced, and kissed for many generations. During the Shoah, as the Nazis destroyed Judaism in Europe, a shamash named Moishele hides the Torah in a cellar. After the Shoah, it finds itself alone, eventually in a museum case, and so desperately wants to reunite with the Jewish people. It wants to go back to “the place where I belong.”

In 2020, however, the tides turned. The Sefer Torah previously displaced was where it was supposed to be in the Aron Kodesh, but we were not there to read from it, embrace it, and kiss it. Once again, Abie Rotenberg, along with R. Baruch Levine, composed a [song](#) expressing the sentiments of the moment. The Sefer Torah in this song implores Hashem not to return it, but rather to return the Jews:

We know Hashem your judgement's always fair
 And a Yid can speak to You from anywhere
 But my heart is aching – for their Tefila and their Song
 Please return them to the place where they belong

We are almost full cycle since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Every day after Purim last year, leading up to Shabbat Parashat Ki Tisa, led to new revelations. On Wednesday (Shushan Purim), I learned my school was closing for “a couple of days,” “just as a precaution.” On Thursday morning, the officers and I agreed to cancel *kiddush* and *seudat shlishit*. Later that day, we heard some shuls were closing, and after some deliberations, we agreed to remain open with social distancing (no masks yet!). But on Friday morning, most shuls in the Modern Orthodox community came to the unheard of realization that shuls must close in order to save lives, even if no cases were known to have entered the community. We had to leave the place where we belong.

A year later, many of us have returned to shul on a daily or weekly basis, even with the changes that had to be made in order to prevent further spread of the disease. There are still many of us who have not yet returned to the place where we belong. But as many in our community are receiving first and second doses of the vaccine in the coming weeks or months, we can anticipate the excitement of that return. Some of the [discussion](#) about

the return to shul has been about the long term practical and experiential issues. But what are some pure religious, theological messages that we can internalize as we slowly turn that corner?

The next five parshiyot are dedicated to the building of the Mishkan. While many of us would give a lot to have a few more details about the creation of the world, we are privy to very precise instructions regarding the construction of this sanctuary. Clearly, says the [Slonimer Rebbe](#) in *Nesivos Shalom*, this is one of the most important parts of the Torah.

In introducing the directions to construct the Mishkan, we read the poignant *pasuk*:

And they shall make for me a sanctuary and I will dwell in their midst (Shemot 25:8). ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם.

The question I want to focus on is that it is very clear that in order for Hashem's presence to be with B'nei Yisrael, they needed to first build a "Mikdash." But beyond the physical construction, what is the significance of Klal Yisrael's **actions** in causing the Shechina to dwell with us? Why do we have any role in this?

It is fascinating to note that we are told to make a "Mikdash" when really, throughout the rest of the parshiyot, it is referred to as the "Mishkan". Why do we begin by calling it "Mikdash?" A fundamental principle of holiness in Judaism is that Hashem sanctifies the Jewish people, who then have the power to sanctify. For example, on Yamim Tovim, the *bracha* we say in *kiddush* and the *amidah* is *מקדש ישראל והזמנים* - who sanctifies Israel and the festive seasons. In *Oznayim La-Torah*, R. Zalman Sorotzkin explains there is a progression: Hashem sanctifies Klal Yisrael, who thereby empowers us to sanctify the seasons. Therefore, the Torah does not say to make Hashem a "Mishkan," but rather to make a "Mikdash." It is *we* who sanctify it. This is reflected in a halakha that if a shul is built, it is not considered a "shul" until people are in it, as *הזמנה לאו היא מילתא* - designating it alone is not sufficient (see Arukh Ha-Shulchan O.C. 153:26). Our shuls are not yet holy when we are not there. We need to be there for Hashem's presence to be there.

On the other hand, our actions are not just significant for the holiness of the shul itself but also for what our experiencing of Hashem is. Rabbeinu Bachya quotes the *midrash* that likens the relationship between Klal Yisrael and Hashem as flock and shepherd, respectively, as we say in the popular Yom Kippur *piyyut* "Ki Anu Amecha." While most

shepherds make the pen for their flock, our relationship with Hashem is different. Hashem says to us, I will be your shepherd, but you make the pen, and I will protect you. What this *midrash* teaches us is that Hashem can be our guardian - and this context, Hashem is a spiritual guardian - but Hashem cannot do the work alone. While the human shepherd may conspicuously direct his flock into the pen, Hashem does not compel us to enter the shul. We human beings must commit to the spiritual labor of entering on our own. The shul building does not move, a siddur might sit permanently on the shelf, and Shabbat will come whenever it comes, but for Hashem to guide us in our lives and shepherd our souls, we will only find Him through building and entering our place of spiritual protection. The shul might be there in its *kedusha*, but if we wish to reap the benefits of Hashem's presence, we have to be there.

Yet, ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם teaches us that we need the benefit of other people in order to gain greater *kedusha* in our lives, and that can happen in the context of shul. The Slonimer Rebbe notices a grammatical anomaly - it should say ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכי, meaning I should dwell in "it," the sanctuary. Why does it say בתוכם, in "them?" It means that Hashem is dwelling in each one of us - "בתוכם, בכל אחד ואחד." Each soul must be a Mishkan unto itself; each person must take his or her own "terumah," their own gifts, and use them to elevate their holiness. Every Jew should create a framework where their essence is dedicated to Torah and mitzvot. But then the Rebbe goes on to say that holiness cannot be achieved alone. The places we are told to be holy is said in the plural - קדושים תהיו; והייתם קדושים לאלוקיכם - Because holiness transcends nature, we need the power of others to reach that point. Shabbat, he says, one of the pinnacles of holiness, we need the power of the masses, and that is why the partner of Shabbat is Keneset Yisrael - when we gather together and entwine our souls together, we reach the holiness of Shabbat. Therefore, in order for each one of us to reach the holiness of the Mikdash, we need the strength of the many united as one. While we each have an individual mandate for holiness, we come to shul not just to sanctify Hashem or the shul, but we collectively sanctify ourselves in that manner. How wonderful it will be when we are all truly together and can support each other in our drive to bring Hashem into our lives.

Someone asked me recently if one should say a blessing upon returning to shul for the first time, when that time arrives. This is not necessarily the place for a halachic analysis, but the first time one enters a shul since exiting since last March is the occasion for expression of gratitude and of appreciation for the holiness of shul that we missed. While it is always good to say Mah Tov when coming into shul, this is a good time to savor the words and utter it with greater kavanah. Perhaps one can say a *perek* of Tehillim when walking in, like Psalm 122 - נלך - I rejoiced

when they told me we were going to Beit Hashem. This expression comes at a moment where one did not know when they would be able to go to the House of Hashem, and the excitement comes in being instructed to go. It is an opportunity to pray for the peace of Hashem's dwelling place and its worshippers, and also that malady will never strike there again.

While the Mikdash was made for Hashem and the shul is the representation of Beit Hashem, Hashem does not desire to be there when we are not there. We gain an opportunity to experience the Shechina and elevate our holiness when we are in shul. May we merit to return and to continue to thrice daily be occupants of "the place where we belong."