

SHABBAT TERUMAH 5769

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וַעֲשׂוּ אֲרוֹן עֲצֵי שִׁטִּים אֲמַתִּים וְחָצִי אַרְכּוֹ וְאֲמָה וְחָצִי רְחִבּוֹ וְאֲמָה וְחָצִי קִמְתּוֹ;
וְצִפִּיתָ אֹתוֹ זָהָב טָהוֹר מִבַּיִת וּמִחוּץ תִּצְפְּנֵנּוּ...

They shall make an ark out of acacia wood, two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high. They shall overlay it with pure gold; inside and outside shall they overlay it. (Exodus 25:6-11)

According to Rashi, Betzalel -- the artist who created all the parts of the desert Tabernacle -- actually made three arks. Two of gold and one of wood. He made one out of gold, a little larger than the given specifications. Inside that he placed the wooden ark, and inside that a slightly smaller one made of gold. And thus the wooden ark came to be overlaid with gold.

It is fitting that we are reading *Parashat Terumah* on the Shabbat when we welcome the leadership of the Jewish Federation of New Hampshire -- and in the midst of our own synagogue planning for next year. *Terumah* contains the minutes of the strategic planning meeting for the first and most successful capital campaign in Jewish history. Okay, it's a committee of two, president and secretary -- God, the visionary, and Moshe, faithful scribe, taking minutes. Nonetheless, I can assure you that Jewish leaders everywhere are reading this *parasha* very carefully. Raising funds for the Mishkan, the holy dwelling for the presence of God, was apparently *so* easy. When the first solicitations went out, the Israelites were so moved that they gave too much - donations were turned away! Everything that was needed -- gold and silver, animal skins and precious dyes -- no problem.

This year we read *Terumah* through an even sharper lens. Everywhere, Jewish institutions are dealing with tighter financial situations, less income, and the very uncertain prospects of the next year or two, perhaps even more. *Terumah* is almost a dream for us. For the precious materials, the riches needed to create this sanctuary fit for God's presence, came from slaves. From a community with no employment, no property, no way to grow their own food, nothing other than their herds and the utensils and fabrics they had, quote-unquote, borrowed from the Egyptians on the way out. If they could fund a bold vision under those circumstances, why not us?

I want to use this morning's reading to draw some lessons for us, particularly for those of us most actively trying to sustain Jewish institutions here in southern New Hampshire. How do we learn from what God and Moshe did as they planned atop the mountain? What was their strategy, and what was their vision?

They started with the *aron*, with the ark. This is where the tablets inscribed with God's words would be stored; this is where God's voice would speak to Moshe. Rashi's description of the ark brings up a few paradoxes about this ark. On the one hand, it's made of wood -- humble, simple, natural. On the other hand, its appearance is gold. On the one hand, it's the most important element of the whole sanctuary. On the other hand, it is the most hidden -- no one ever sees it, not even the High Priest who performs the cleansing ritual in smoke on Yom Kippur.

I think the design of the ark represents the strategic challenges that we face as we build our essential Jewish institutions during a time of great need and economic distress. According to one tradition, God did not come up with the design of the Mishkan until after the Golden Calf. *After* the Israelites had shown that they would give their jewelry, their gold, to follow anyone or anything that promised them a sense of direction, or a respite from fear. You would think that after they had just squandered their precious gold on an illusion, that there would be none left. You would think that the Israelites would never give it over so quickly to a project much more intricate and difficult to understand.

But they did, and I think God and Moshe understood that they could not create the sacred place without gold. I don't believe that gold, the expensive beauty of our synagogues and other institutions, is just a display, just showing off. I have been thinking a lot this week about the Jewish foundation I owe for my rabbinic education. As many of you know, The Wexner Foundation took me and another one hundred alumni of its fellowship to south Florida for our annual conference. It was all expenses paid. We were flown in mostly from the northeast and California, but also from Europe and Israel. The food was superb. We had hors d'oeuvres on a boat.

They could have saved thousands of dollars by holding the conference somewhere in the New York area. They might have asked us to pay for our flights, or a small registration fee. Instead, it was an ark overlaid with gold, inside and out. Why did they do that?

I think that The Wexner Foundation decided that part of making us feel strong and secure in our work and in our visions included not taking all the gold away. Even rabbis and Jewish leaders passionate about what we do feel the fear. What if we can't afford to present what we're about, what if people can't see us or won't give us a look if the paint gets chipped or the brochures look crappy. What if we cancel the big scholar in residence, or the big fundraiser. The trip to Florida reminded us there is still some gold out there, and it's all right to use it.

Yes, what is most important in the work we do in the Jewish community is not the glitz. Yes, the most important part of all is our warmth, our hearts, our Torah, our sense of community. But we live in a world of golden calves. Others -- our cultural competition -- will use their gold to promote nothing but emptiness, togetherness without community, simplistic formulas for happiness. Our Torah is different. It will be found, ultimately, in a beautiful wood compartment -- like this very sanctuary where we pray today. But it helps to put it in a container overlaid with gold, so to speak. Some people will only find the Torah in the wood if they notice the gold and then are enticed to penetrate within.

That's my case for the website, the blog, the marketing budget, the pilot program, even at a time of crisis. When gold and silver are what got us into the economic mess, you could say -- now they're exposed, let's be the opposite. But what people want to see is money deployed with purpose, a spiritual and moral return on investment. Now, like no other time, they'll recognize it for what it really means in our world. And with no investment, there can be no return.

That hidden ark, where God's voice speaks behind a veil; the tablets hidden inside the gold --

that's another challenge. We say: Jews want all kinds of things, and most of it isn't religion. It's a social opportunities, it's speakers, it's culture, it's fun, and for some small number it's Torah and mitzvot. Look at synagogues, see how Jews vote with their feet -- how many join, how many participate? I agree 100%. Sort of.

I think we have made the Torah, and the voice of wisdom and souls, too hidden. What a soul wants and needs is what is in the ark. That is where the key to a rich life is. We often make Judaism superficial. That's a whole talk in and of itself.

When we do plan social events, volunteer projects, cultural happenings, even educational events -- we have to be alive to how each can be a window into what's hidden in the box. I'm not talking about text study everywhere all the time. What people seek when they get together -- in any way, for any reason -- is a sense of deep connection, and a tie to their own sometimes hidden souls. To be recognized as a person of worth and consequence.

I do fear that in this economic crisis, we will not have what we need as institutions and we will not be able to meet even basic needs. What I fear even more is that we as Jewish institutions will not even be relevant to people. To those without jobs or health care or homes, in their need -- but also to the greater sense of community, to creating a whole that binds together the holy in each of us regardless of our financial situation.

You can plan a party or a program with a consciousness of deep community, or not. You can hide the Torah in three layers of boxes. But we can support and create programs and institutions that enable the voice of God to waft outward from that place on top of the ark, into our daily lives.

God and Moshe knew that even a group of unemployed wanderers, scared and homeless, burned after following an idol, would fund a major project built on this kind of meaning. That's our mandate now. Whether it's Jeff or me, Emilie or Elliot, the board of the Federation or of Temple Beth Abraham. Here, we are engaged in writing our mission and vision statements. The Federation is doing strategic planning as well. It's not about being better at what synagogues do, or what Federations do. It's about asking what Jews need most deeply, and what kind of institution a synagogue should be, and what kind of institution a Federation should be. The answers we get might be unfamiliar, and that might frighten us at first. But if the questions are right, good answers -- necessary answers -- will follow.

At the beginning of the *parasha*, God instructs Moshe to get *terumah*, elevating donations, from the Israelites. God explains, **מֵאֵת כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְבְּנוּ לְבֹו תִקְחוּ אֶת-תְּרוּמָתִי** -- *from each person whose heart moves him you will take My donation*. The right visions will speak to hearts. And hearts will move people to give. And from that giving, we will build strong institutions even in these difficult times.

Shabbat shalom!