

Ki Tissa – Devar Torah

*Where God dwells: Celebrating Our Individual Contributions to Create Holy Space*

Everyone take a deep breath... and let us center our thoughts in order to contemplate the following question--- what is the one place where you feel most *holy*? It is an unusual question, I know, so I invite you to close your eyes and ask yourself this question once again--- Where is your personal *holy* space? It could be a dot on the map--- perhaps it is a serene island beach, a stunning mountain view, or a small creek nestled in the countryside... Or maybe you envision your own living room or home office, or perhaps you see your family kitchen or the music room. Perhaps some of us may thought about the Sanctuary we find ourselves in this very moment, where we join together to share so many sacred occasions in our lives and the communal life of our people.

Now that we all have a place in mind, try as best as you can to describe for yourself what makes that space holy? Is it the atmosphere, the ambiance, the carefully coordinated decorations, the calming color tones or the soothing lights? Is it the sound, the smell, the stillness that gives you solace? Is it the warm people that inhabit this area, or the absorbing activities that take place in this room. What is it that makes a place *holy* and special to you?

In our everyday lives we do not often think about holy places or what makes them special. How remarkable it is then that our Torah recounts chapter upon chapter, verse after verse--- even down to the most minute detail--- in its account of the Tabernacle and its construction. For those that could use a refresher, the Tabernacle was a portable Temple that the Israelites are said to have carried with them on their

long trek to Eretz Yisrael. For our wandering ancestors, the Tabernacle formed the center of the community and represented the dwelling place of Adonai among the Israelite people. This week's Torah portion, *Ki Tissa*, begins with a description of the Tabernacle and of all the necessary arrangements for its construction.

We are told in the first verses of *Ki Tissa* that the first step in constructing the Tabernacle was to take a census of the Israelite people. There were two objectives of this survey, 1) to take a count of all the Israelites, and 2) to collect funds for the construction of the Tabernacle. You see, not much has changed in 2,500 years--- even Moses had to fundraise for his Temple's capital campaign. The book of Exodus chapter 30, verse 15 states,

*"heh-ashir lo yarbeh, v'hadal lo yam'it, mimachatzit hashekel—lateit et t'rumat adonai l'chapeir al nafshoteichem"*

"The rich shall give no more, and the poor shall give no less than half a shekel, with which to give the offering to the Lord, to atone for your souls." (Ex 30:15)

What is remarkable in this passage is the equalizing component of the Tabernacle tax--- "The rich shall give no more, the poor shall give no less." What a profound spiritual teaching--- We learn from this passage that when it comes to building God's dwelling place, all among the people are counted as equals and every single individual is expected to contribute their fair share. The Tabernacle, therefore, is not just a meeting place between human beings and the divine, but also of one human being to another. When we come together as a community to do the work of Adonai, all people are considered important and valued contributors.

While the Tabernacle represents the profound equality among the Israelite people this is not to say that every Israelite is identical. No, In fact within the next chapter of Ki Tissa the Torah specifically tells us about individuals among the community who are chosen from among the multitude to bring their special skills and talents to the communal project. Exodus Chapter 31:1-3 states:

*Vay'dabeir Adonai El Moshe laymor: r'eih karati v'sheim, betzalel ben uri ven chur, Imatei yehudah. va'amalei oto ruach elohim, bchochmah uvitvunah uvda'at uvchol malacha.*

Now Adonai spoke to Moses saying: See, I have singled out by name Betzalel son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have filled him with the spirit of God in practical wisdom, discernment and knowledge in all kinds of workmanship.

Betzalel is a skilled artisan who is enlisted by Adonai and Moses to oversee the construction of the Tabernacle. Here the Torah teaches that it is simply NOT enough for everyone to pay the mandatory Tabernacle tax, but that individuals must ALSO rise up from the minimum expectation and offer the community that which is personally unique. The gifted artisan Betzalel represents the capacity within each and everyone to contribute our God given talents and energies. The Tabernacle, or any holy place for that matters, requires both inherently communal offerings and uniquely personal contributions.

I would be remiss if I did not also mention that this week's Torah portion, *Ki Tissa*, also contains the famous story of the Israelites and the Golden Calf. The story of the Golden Calf is familiar to many of us: While Moses is up on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, the Israelites abandon their faith in God and commit the sin of idol worship. Perhaps the Torah juxtaposes the optimistic description of the

Tabernacle's construction with the communal failure of the Golden Calf in order to teach us a lesson about life; Setbacks often follow success, and sometimes our most lofty hopes for the future must endure through momentary deficiencies of faith.

Let us take away from this Torah portion the importance of holy places in our lives. It is not just the minute physical details that makes a place holy, but also the intention behind its construction and the communal synergy that its construction creates. The Torah teaches us that the Tabernacle, and by extension all Jewish sacred spaces, are the meeting place between human beings and the divine where everyone is considered equal in status and obligation. Furthermore, we learn from the description of Betzalel the artisan that each of us in the community has been called to rise from among the many and contribute our unique, God given talents.

In our work for the community and for each other, may we be filled with the Spirit of God. And may our individual and collective contributions to this community create a dwelling place for the divine in our lives.

Shabbat Shalom.