

Terumah 5779

The Three Disruptors

There's something odd about this week's Torah portion. As you know, because we read it earlier, it begins with God asking Moses to tell the Israelites to 'take a contribution' - a *terumah* - for God. This contribution will be used to create the first ever communal structure in our tradition, which has three names: a *mishkan* (Dwelling); a *mikdash* (Sanctuary) and an *Ohel Moed* (Tent of Meeting).

Up until revelation the Torah has been proceeding chronologically - covering large chunks of time initially, then progressively smaller, but always moving forward. Until now. Now we have a kink in the narrative. At the end of last week, the Torah told us that Moses was up the mountain for a period of 40 days and 40 nights. In two weeks' time, the story will pick up, with the people impatient and worried that he has not come down. But in the middle, we get this week's and next week's Torah readings - which clearly belong *after* the one we will be reading in two weeks' time. Very strange.

There are explanations of all kinds, of course. Rashi (the famous medieval commentator) teaches us the principle *ein mukdam u'meuhar ba-Torah* - the Torah does not obey chronology. Rather, the Torah works by prioritizing concepts, and the conceptual order will always trump the chronological one, it's just that up until now there's been no need to disrupt the chronology.

But what exactly is this concept that is so important that it interrupts the regularly scheduled programming? Well, the project has three different names, so let's explore three different answers - three different 'disruptors' that might explain why time's gotten all messed up.

One possibility is that the message of the Mishkan is about teamwork. A project of this dimension could not have been put together by a single individual. Each and every Israelite needed to contribute their resources and their skills, giving them all ownership of, and investment in, the result. It seems that to be part of a team is some kind of fundamental drive within human beings. Just think for a moment about the various teams to which you belong...or with which you identify...and how it feels to be part of those teams.

Teamwork has benefits. When a team works well, then innovation, dynamism, the ability for each member to focus on what they are best at without having to spread themselves thin, support, encouragement, the building of trust - all of these become available, or more readily available. Efficiency increases, competence grows through collaboration, selfishness is challenged and the energy it takes up is re-allocated into productivity.

As a result, a team is far more than the sum of its parts. And perhaps this 'holy mathematics,' this 'one plus one equals far more than one' proposition is such an important message for the still-traumatized Israelites that even chronology gets interrupted so as to convey it to them. The idea of working together out of freewill would have been entirely new to them. Not like slavery, where you get no choice about it - but voluntarily, with a cheerful heart, with a greater end in view. Maybe because teamwork is such a new idea, it bursts into the narrative and disrupts it.

But that's not the only disruptor here in *Terumah*. Rachel Anisfield, a scholar from the University of Pennsylvania, understands the central message to be not so much about teamwork but more about one-on-one relationships. She points out that the place God lives *within* the Mishkan is described as being the space between the two cherubim on the top of the Ark.

The cherubim are to be constructed facing each other - *ish el ahiv*, meaning, literally 'one man toward his brother' - and Dr Anisfield points out that this motif is repeated throughout the parashah. She writes:

"We find it later, in the feminine, ishah el ahotah, "one woman toward her sister," referring to the joining of separate cloths together to make a cover for the Tabernacle. Another frequent term is vehibarta, "you should join or attach" from the same root as the modern Hebrew haver, friend. We also find here the use of an unusual word, te'omim, which here refers to the matching up of planks, and in modern Hebrew means "twins."

All this, she suggests, is to draw our attention to the way that a relationship of one thing to another stands at the heart of every great project. We can imagine for ourselves the one-on-one relationships that formed between the participants who built the Mishkan. Perhaps they met over sewing a curtain, or shaping a wooden beam. And perhaps those relationships lasted beyond the project, helping the Israelites to bond together as a sharing society. As in the book of *Bereishit*, 'it is not good for humans to be alone.' Rather, we must face each other, look each other in the eyes. And then, change can happen.

Is *this* the important message that bursts through time to tell itself to us? Perhaps.

There is one further possibility, I think. Participation in any project - I mean, any project that produces an end result, especially one as intricate as the Mishkan - requires that we access and harness our own creativity. We need to open ourselves up to the flow of inspiration. According to a midrash, this was exactly the point of the Mishkan project - to help each individual participant contact their *hokhmat lev* - their heart-wisdom, their intuition. In building the Mishkan, each former slave found that they could do things they had never dreamed of before, that they possessed abilities they never knew they had. And they emerged from the project changed - more confident, more inspired, perhaps more fully realized and alive to their potential and purpose than ever before.

So - there we are. Three possibilities for a message that it is so urgent to convey that Torah interrupts its flow in order to do so. The value of working as a team; the value of one-on-one relationships; the value of potential.

We can't go back in time and ask the Israelites which they thought it was. But I am struck by how important those three perspectives still are in our modern conversations today about community. What makes a community 'go,' what keeps it healthy, what ensures its survival? One way or another, each of these three disruptors ideas - teamwork, partnership, the harnessing of potential - is still as relevant for organizations today as it was at the time the Mishkan - or the Mikdash, or the Ohel Moed, first came to be.

Shabbat shalom.