

Shabbat Shalom.

As I sat down earlier, thinking about how to address you this week, I knew that it was impossible *not* to speak about Gaza. Many of us are reading the news stories about the military offensive on Rafah, about ceasefire deals that have been rejected by both Hamas and Netanyahu. We're reading about mounting death tolls, with over 28,000 Palestinian deaths, seeing images this week of people fleeing from a hospital in Khan Younis and hearing stories of Israeli loved ones who are killed in battle. And we continue to read about Israeli hostages, who remain in captivity, despite the military campaign to free them.

In the face of all this trauma, we have spoken from this bimah about the urgent need to end this war immediately, to demand a release of hostages, to care for Israelis and Palestinians in grief and terror, to rebuild Gaza and reimagine a Peace Process.

And tonight, while I can tell you that I am praying for a bilateral ceasefire to take hold between Hamas and Israel, I am also thinking about us, and about our future as American Jews. As you can guess, it has been near impossible for me to know the right things to say to you. To keep competing values in equipoise, and to try to hold this entire community together. As I read through the Torah portion this week, detailing as it does the construction of the mishkan, or tabernacle, I kept thinking about what kind of Jewish community we are building in the aftermath of October 7th, and our communal rupture since then. Even though I think this specific community is doing a pretty good job, I continue to wonder what else we could be doing. Especially as Jewish institutions around the country circle the wagons and/or pick sides, and leave little room for dissent.

Looking at Parashat Terumah, with all its blueprint precision for constructing the ultimate Jewish institution, I wonder again: what is it telling us for what we can and must build?

In this week's Torah portion, we read God's words, "make for me a sanctuary so that I may dwell within them," with famous phrasing that seems to imply that God dwells within us. But even if we're talking about a dwelling place for God, here, the real story is about the people who make it.

At the beginning of the parsha, God says to Moses, "tell the Israelite people, *vayik'chu li trumah*, you shall TAKE gifts from me, take gifts from every person whose heart so moves him."

This translation retains the fact that the verb *lakach* appears twice, "to take." And in the next verse, yet again: *V'zot hatrumah asher tik'chu me'itam: zahav, va'chesef, u'n'choshet*. And these are the gifts that you shall *take* from them: gold, silver, and copper. After these first materials are listed, the parsha reads like an Ikea manual, with all manner of supplies that the Israelites bring to Moses for the construction of the tabernacle. That's what Parashat Terumah is all about – the people coming together to take different things and bring them to construct what will become their most sacred space. The collective makes its sanctuary for God, precisely by combining different objects and, we might say, by combining differing points of view.

Numerous midrashim make the connection between this verb *tik'chu*, you shall take, as it appears here, and another instance of the verb – *Lekach* – as it appears in the book of Proverbs.

Ki *Lekach* Tov Natati Lahem, Torati Al Ta'azovu.

That verse is more familiar to any of you paying close attention during the Torah service, and we can translate it to mean: "for I give you good take-aways, do not forsake my Torah."

Before getting into where the midrash goes with it, let's just make this verbal connection completely clear. The Torah text says that God asks the Israelites to "take for me," *vayik'chu li*. And the verse from Proverbs uses the verb in the form of *lekach* to describe the Torah, which *will be taken* by

Israelites. It may seem like a tenuous connection and, let's face it, the rabbis play fast and loose with verbal connections all the time. But this is not the wildest idea – the people *take* things and give them for the creation of a tabernacle. The people also *take* the Torah from God. And thus, the connection between the two.

The Midrash Tanchuma weaves these verses together to try to explain what's unique about this taking. There we read a parable of two merchants. One merchant sells silk, and the other sells peppers. When these two merchants sell all their goods to one another, they basically swap: one ends up with silk and the other ends up with peppers. When they take from one another, their finite stores are depleted. But unlike this kind of mundane commerce, the midrash says, when it comes to merchants of Torah – that is, scholars – if one scholar shares knowledge of agricultural laws and the other shares knowledge of ritual laws, each of them ends up with double shares of knowledge, and their stores remain intact.

This is a sweet and true insight: that Torah, knowledge, is a kind of eternal, renewable resource that can and must be shared.

The point is that when it came to the materials that the Israelites gave to build the tabernacle, somehow, their giving didn't cause them any lack. Somehow, when the Israelites gave of themselves, they were also *taking* in such a way that they ended up with much more than what they had before. And so it is with different viewpoints – that sharing an opinion doesn't diminish what's in store. In fact, as we learn time and again from Jewish sources, a multiplicity of opinions makes us stronger, and gets us closer to truth, without losing anything. I am grateful that this is a value here at CBE. Last weekend, members of CBE gathered to share their views about Israel/Palestine, which spanned the continuum of possible opinions. But still, the diversity of views was worth sharing. In pursuit of truth, and even more so in the service of community.

The Sfat Emet, the great Hasidic sage, emphasized the importance of this diversity, pointing to the same midrash I just mentioned. He teaches that

every member of the Jewish community has a particular portion within Torah, yet it is also Torah that joins our souls together...we become one as a people by reading the same Torah, but in order to engage with Torah we have to receive from one another the unique viewpoint that belongs to each individual. We add to Torah, by hearing new perspectives from others...and we don't lose a thing.

And then, he explains, "the same was true in the building of the tabernacle. Each one gave his own offering, but they were all joined together by the tabernacle, until they became one. Only then [after giving] did they merit the in-dwelling presence of God." The greatest *takeaway* of all.

By giving, they were able to take. And more specifically they were able to take part in the life of the people, and its relationship with God. The Sfat Emet is saying that the Torah and the tabernacle are each expressions of oneness, or unity – but that unity is only possible when everyone offers something a little bit different.

This teaching seems precious at first, but it's actually quite radical, especially for an Orthodox rabbi. On the one hand, he's arguing that all voices must be heard, and that it is important to have a diversity of perspectives. But, he's also arguing that unless *all* these different elements are part of the whole, then the final product is incomplete. This is a much more complex model of unity than the way we usually think about it. Unity doesn't mean we all agree. It means that we have distinct identities and views that remain distinct but that we retain meaningful relationships with one another. The unity is merely the coming together of different – sometimes contradictory – things. In fact, unity requires that we must be ourselves, and allow for the friction that's inevitable between two opinions. Which, if you know anything about Jews, basically tracks. And therefore the tabernacle, the Torah, and the synagogue all depend on the strength of diversity within them.

Friends, it is not my job to tell you what to believe about this moment. I can tell you what *I* believe. And I can hold you in what *you* believe. If we are to

build a Jewish community, we must hold each other even when we disagree. That has been the hallmark of our people for at least 2,000 years. We are living now in a new Jewish world, and future historians will one day write about the complexities of this time. I pray that when they do, they will find that somehow, the American Jewish community was able to thrive, despite the many competing views that they held.

We pray tonight for an end to this war. And / pray that as we do that in different ways, we're able to create a Jewish community strong enough to hold us all.

Shabbat Shalom.