

Terumah 5784

February 17, 2024

Responding to Bailey Star and Azai Katznelson

19 weeks since October 7

Bailey and Azai, thank you for your beautiful divrei Torah. Azai, you want us to see in this parasha that though it contains a lot of detailed instructions of gifts to bring to build the mishkan or Tabernacle, no one was coerced or even convinced to give. The whole exercise was voluntary, and more than anything it depended on the desire of the Israelites to pitch in and help. It was a kind of a test about whether and how much people cared. You see this parasha as a call to us to care and be kind.

And Bailey, first of all, how amazing that you built a model of the ark. I can't tell you how happy that makes me that you brought it to life and even plated it with gold. You want us to see that the gifts the people brought, including the gold, were precious not because they were expensive but because they created a space for Gd to dwell among the people. Not only were the materials themselves not the point, but the space they built wasn't ultimately even necessary, because Gd doesn't just dwell in our sanctuaries but in us. And not only on Shabbat, but all the time. And, you taught, we have an active role to play in bringing the sacred into the world. Azai and Bailey, what important and Torah-true messages for us all to hear.

One of the questions that all of precious materials raises is how we assign value to things and to people. How do we understand our value, human value, in relation to those precious metals and other expensive things? A rabbi named Allan Berkowitz wrote that there are 300 Rembrandt paintings in the world, and one of them recently sold for \$13.8 million. He asked, if there are 300 Rembrandts but only one of you and only one of me, how much are we worth?

Writing for T'ruah, the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, Rabbi Berkowitz pointed out that the name of our parasha, Terumah, means to elevate, to lift

up, and that what was happening in the parasha is that ordinary objects – some wood, some thread, some animal skins, some metal – were transformed into holy objects by being dedicated to the service of Gd. An ordinary object, like a table for example, entered a state of kedusha, or holiness, by its designation for the mishkan, the Tabernacle. If something has kedusha, holiness, it is priceless, it is beyond all human measures of value. Therefore, through intention and action, an object can be elevated to holiness, pricelessness, exceeding the most expensive thing we can imagine.

Other objects in the mishkan were holy because they were extensions of Gd. Like the ark that you built, Bailey. It contained the tablets of the covenant, the Ten Commandments, which came from Gd, and therefore the tablets were holy and the ark was holy. Far more than a \$13.8 million Rembrandt painting, no matter how beautiful it is.

Rabbi Berkowitz argued that human beings are holy in both of these ways. First of all, we have kedusha, holiness, because like the tablets of the Ten Commandments, we come from Gd. Torah and Jewish tradition are consistently clear that human beings are created b'tselem Elohim, in the image of Gd, as extensions of Gd in the world. In addition, humans are vessels of Gd's very essence. As you taught us, Bailey and Azai, in our own parasha Gd doesn't say "Build me a sanctuary and I will dwell in it," rather **וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם**

Let them (the people) make me a sanctuary so that I will dwell within them." And Proverbs 20 tells us: **נֵר יְהוָה נִשְׁמַת אָדָם**. The soul of a human is the light of Gd." So kedushah, or holiness, is the natural condition of every human being, regardless of what they do in their lives, regardless of what position or status they attain or how much gold they possess, regardless of whether we like them or we don't. Every human being has kedusha, holiness, by being an image and vessel of Gd. So every human being is worth more than the most valuable object we could measure, far more than \$13.8 million.

As amazing as it is that each of us has holiness, it's even more amazing that we have the consciousness enough to know it. In Mishnah Avot (3:14),

Rabbi Akiva teaches, “Beloved is humankind having been created in Gd’s image. And with an added measure of Gd’s love does humankind *know* that we were created in Gd’s image.” In other words, Rabbi Akiva is saying that our awareness of our holiness is a gift of love. We can also see it as an obligation different from the choice the Israelites had at the building of the mishkan. They were working with objects that were not originally holy and they were choosing to make them holy by dedicating them to the service of Gd. If we know that every human being has kedusha or holiness from birth, aren’t we obligated to appropriately value their lives with our actions?

This is the first way that objects became holy in the building of the Tabernacle: people decided to designate them as holy. People lifted them up as *terumah* and, dedicating them to the mishkan, elevated them to the status of holy. With human beings, who already have holiness, the lifting up, the elevation is from holy to more holy. As Rabbi Berkowitz teaches, “In the Tabernacle, the curtain was a line between the Holy and the Holier. Similarly, our actions in a moment of human engagement are a curtain [that we can pull back] between the sacred and the even more sacred.”

As a society, we have a long way to go. Azai, you talked about people who have no homes, people who are unhoused or homeless. You also talked about your mom’s work with refugees through HIAS. I happen to know that your dad also works for justice for people who are incarcerated. As a society we flat out fail to honor the inherent, Gd-given holiness in human beings if they don’t have a home, or if they’re locked up, or if they’re simply not from here. In February, Jewish communities observe Refugee Shabbat, when we strive to lift up the holiness, the sacredness of the lives of refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers. The 150,000 who are here in New York simply seeking to make a life and a home. Many of whom are denied shelter after the 30 day shelter limit runs out, finding themselves on the streets in the bitterness of winter with no way to support themselves, as it takes at least 6 months to get work papers. And the 110 million forcibly displaced people in the world, 36.4 million of whom are refugees, many of whom are languishing in refugee camps and waiting for the ability to find a

new home somewhere, anywhere. We are epically failing to lift up the holiness, the sacredness that Gd has given to every human life.

And right now, as much of the world has failed to honor the humanity– the inherent holiness– of Jews and Israelis, to care about the extreme violence against Israeli women and unbelievably brutal atrocities committed against our people, or to care about our need to have a safe place in the world, many of us are failing to see and lift up the humanity and the holiness of each Palestinian life in Gaza, more than one million of whom are huddled in and around Rafah, trapped between the Israeli army, the Egyptian border and the Mediterranean Sea in one of the worst humanitarian crises of our era, 28,000 of whom are already dead as the fighting continues – and Israel walks away from the negotiation table while more than 130 Israeli hostages remain. We are utterly failing to lift up the inherent holiness of human life– both Israeli and Palestinian.

We must do better. Just as the Israelites were taught in this parashah to voluntarily pitch in and help, to find the caring inside of them and the kindness, we each have the choice to use our awareness of Gd's presence within every human being, our consciousness of the holiness of all life, to elevate that holiness in all who are homeless, all who are imprisoned, all who are refugees, all who are seeking safety and self-determination. To honor, protect, defend, and champion human life wherever it is threatened, devalued, ignored, or oppressed. In elevating the inherent holiness in others we elevate our own. That is how we build a mishkan for Gd, a dwelling place for the Holy One within and among us.

Shabbat Shalom.