

Diversity Makes Us Beautiful (Exodus 25:2)

Parashat Terumah 5786

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Shabbat Shalom! In our Torah, Parashat Terumah, Exodus Chapter 25, Verse 2:

דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִקְחוּ-לִי תְרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְבְּנוּ לִבּוֹ תִקְחוּ אֶת-תְּרוּמָתִי:

“Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart is so moved.”¹

A seemingly simple command, and yet, under the surface, incredibly profound. All of the Israelites, all of them, people of all genders and ages, are to bring terumah, are to bring gifts forward. Except, this is no longer Mitzrayim, Ancient Egypt. No longer must the Israelites respond to commands under threat of punishment from Pharaoh. In this new reality, they are commanded to bring these gifts, but only the people whose hearts are so moved are to bring them forward. These gifts are donated, given freely, not brutally taken away from them. Sforno, our rabbinic commentator from 16th century Italy, directly distinguishes this collection from a community tax, noting that “contributions were to be accepted only from volunteers.” Each person, their heart moved in this moment, brings what they can bring.

¹ Exodus 25:2

The rest of Parashat Terumah provides us with a complex set of details for the Mishkan that the Israelites are to construct together with these material gifts. The Mishkan, or tabernacle, will be the place in which God will dwell amongst the people as they make their way toward the Promised Land. Constructed with an intricate number of metals, stones, woods, and fabrics, spanning a variety of colors and hues, and including detailed shapes and images. Once built, the Mishkan would be a beautiful space fit for divine revelation, connection, and understanding. The Israelites coming together to construct the Mishkan also differs from their experience in Ancient Egypt. During that dark time in our peoples' story, the Israelites built great pyramids and palaces, gorgeous monuments; but it was all for Pharaoh. Now, after escaping tyranny and enslavement, the Israelites are building something beautiful, something imbued with holiness, for God and for themselves.

Our Torah is clear that the Israelites can only construct the Mishkan by lots of people bringing their gifts together. Each individual identifies what they have to offer and chooses to build something beautiful and holy for the betterment of themselves, the new Israelite society, and perhaps even the entire world. The beauty of the Mishkan comes from diversity, from variety, from difference. With each of these gifts from individual Israelites whose hearts were so moved to be a part of something bigger than themselves, the Mishkan becomes whole, total, complete, and stunningly holy.

As many of you know, I grew up in Oklahoma City, home to a small, but mighty Jewish community. One facet of this community was that there was not much variety in terms of Jewish practice; the same could be said of NFTY, the Reform Jewish youth movement, of which I was a part of, and my Reform Jewish summer camp. It wasn't until I came to New York City when I was 22 that I truly experienced Jews from a variety of races and cultures doing Judaism vastly different from one another. It's one of the things that I love about being Jewish in this city, and it's one of the things that I love and appreciate about our community. As we say in our welcome statement each week, "we come from every race and myriad cultures", and, "we have a broad range of perspectives and many different ways of practicing our Judaism." And although it's true, the hard part is truly embracing this diversity.

The divides that exist amongst the Jewish people are not new, and yet they threaten our ability to, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “be a light unto the nations.”² The disagreements before us, especially concerning Israel, Zionism, and antisemitism, or Jewish practice and observance, are real and difficult and deserve to be wrestled with. And yet, our Torah reminds us of the power of people coming together to build something beautiful. Of embodying diversity, appreciating it, and then celebrating it. In a little more than a week, our sanctuary will be full for Megillah Across Brooklyn, our annual Purim celebration with dozens of other communities in Brooklyn. And later that week, on March 7th, the Sephardi/Mizrahi Small Group of CBE will host a havdalah event featuring our Cantorial Intern Leslie Goldberg in which all of us will have the opportunity to explore melodies from Sephardi and Mizrahi Jewish communities around the world. Across our differences, we have the ability to build something great, together.

² Isaiah 42:6

This concept, people individually coming together to build something greater than themselves, is also found within the tradition of this country. 250 years ago, on July 4, 1776, the signers of the Declaration of Independence also instituted the seal of the country, adopting a somewhat vague, yet familiar and powerful Latin phrase: E Pluribus Unum; Out of many, one.³ Out of many backgrounds and beliefs, we come together as one. Although this country has never fulfilled the ideals of this phrase, including during its adoption at the founding of the country, it remains an aspiration for us all. Or at least, it should remain an aspiration if we are to address the enormous challenges that surround us right now. If we are ever to address the immoral sin of poverty, the scourge of racial and religious discrimination, the fatal blasts of gun violence, the impending doom of climate change, and so many other challenges that confront us day after day, we desperately need more connections and relationships across difference. We must understand, value, and appreciate the vastness of our diversity in this country.

³ E Pluribus Unum, Britannica; <https://www.britannica.com/topic/E-pluribus-unum-United-States-motto>.

And this desperate need has only been exacerbated over the past year, as we witness the tyranny of a different pharaoh, yet one that speaks and acts like the pharaoh of old. This pharaoh seeks to construct monuments to himself to feed his own ego; this pharaoh enacts cruel policies upon the most vulnerable in our society and world, echoing the cruelty of Amalek, the enemy of the Israelites; this pharaoh frivolously enacts chaos around the world, not caring about the consequences; and, this pharaoh does not see the beauty, the power of diversity, of different people coming together to build something great, and in that way this pharaoh fails to understand this great maxim of American tradition, *e pluribus unum*, out of many, one.

In contrast to our modern day pharaoh in the White House, the beautiful brightness of diversity was on full display two weeks ago on SuperBowl Sunday during Bad Bunny's halftime performance. Through an artful, considerate, and joyful 13-minute show, the 31-year old Puerto Rican artist demonstrated the beauty and strength that can come from diversity. Even though producers tried to get him to perform in English, he sang exclusively in his native Spanish, inspiring Spanish speakers all around the world. He lifted up the unique history of his home, Puerto Rico, showing pride in his heritage, even amidst oppression from the United States. At the very end of the show, dancers surrounded him with the flags of countries that make up the Americas as he listed them all, and he held a football that read "Together, we are America". Bad Bunny's performance exuded strength, power, and unity and above all else beauty through diversity, not despite it. Through his message of love conquering hate, he demonstrated the ikar, the essence, of out of many, one.

Whether it is within our Jewish community in Brooklyn, with the Jewish people around the world, or with the people of this country, we can see the ways in which diversity not only makes us stronger, not only makes us wiser, not only makes us bolder - diversity makes us beautiful. My prayer on this Shabbat, as we read Parashat Terumah, I pray that we each find the ways in which our hearts move us to action, and I pray that the structures we create, we, from all different backgrounds and beliefs, bring more goodness, more compassion, more love, and yes, more beauty into our world. Shabbat Shalom!