

## SERMON: TERUMAH

on the occasion of Sinai's BOARD INSTALLATION

Feb 8, 2019

### **BUILDING A SANCTUARY FROM THE INSIDE OUT**

#### **PART I - Sacred Partnership**

We are here tonight to celebrate Shabbat, but also to install our new Board of Directors, to pray for their success, and to offer our support to them.

It seems particularly fitting that our Torah Portion is Terumah, which describes the building of the Mishkan, or Tabernacle- or in other words, the original Temple. It tells us in great detail how to make every object, from the **menorah** to **ark of the covenant**, to the **rings** that hold up the curtains.

While every synagogue needs leaders and board to do the work of keeping things running and healthy, our Torah portion begins not with the leadership, but with the people, and I wanted to pause and reflect on that for a bit.

The Torah says:

דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ־לִי תְרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְבַּנּוּ לְבֹו תִקְחוּ אֶת־תְּרוּמָתִי:

***Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves them.***

I believe there is a reason that the building of a sanctuary, a tabernacle, a temple begins with the people 'whose hearts are moved' to give. It does not start with one large donor or two, but with small valuable gifts brought by many people. These are people who left Egypt and are carrying the possessions with them through the wilderness, but here they are moved to give their valuable gold and silver for the building of a tabernacle that will stand in the center of the community.

If the people are not moved to contribute what is most valuable to them – their gold, their time, their talents – then all the craft and art in the world won't make it a tabernacle, a MISHKAN, a place where God dwells among us. That can only

happen when we step forward and become part of creating it. The divine dwells where people work together, give of themselves to one another, and sacrifice for the greater good.

And remember, they are not giving to get something. This is not 'fee for service', but rather a sense of duty to support the institutions at the center of communal and religious life. Without such support, there can be no communal religious life.

The temple is the heart of the community, and while we are here to honor the board, I wanted to start by honoring the countless donations, large and small, that so many people have made to create and keep alive a Reform synagogue in Burlington. Let us just take a moment and remember the people we might know or have known who have given their time, their love, their expertise, their money to make this place come to life.

A board at its best understands this, that their work and their sacrifice of time and energy is part of building a **sacred partnership with the members of the congregation.**

Sacred partnerships recognize each of us as individuals and our desire to inspire sacred action in our communities. Sacred partnerships are built and nurtured through the Jewish values of mutual respect, trust, honesty, listening and communication, transparency, confidentiality, flexibility, and reflection.

Congregations thrive when leaders embrace sacred partnership, represent the diverse spectrum of the community, nurture new ideas and experimentation, and promote an inquisitive, positive organizational mindset. The people who step forward to serve on a Board only want the congregation to thrive, and so as we go through this year together, when things inevitably emerge that are irksome, or frustrating, or downright infuriating, **let us remember that we all share the same intentions, and the desire for a sacred community that we can all contribute to, be included in, be appreciate in, and help thrive.**

If we can remember to **thank those who serve** in leadership, **even** when we disagree, and if those who serve can remember that **everyone wants this to succeed**, and their concerns and passions, and yes, **kvetching**, are rooted in our shared desire, we will have already made great strides toward the creation of a tabernacle, a dwelling place for the holy in the midst of our community. But for

that to happen, for us to create a **HOLY PLACE where the spirit of God dwells among us**, we must all bring our own gifts and offerings.

SONG: "Holy Place" by Debbie Friedman

## PART II - Entering the Mishkan

What was the purpose of the **mishkan, the Tabernacle in the center of the community?** It was to have a place in the center where the Divine Presence could dwell among us. As our Torah Portion says,

וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשִׁכְנֹתַי בְּתוֹכְכֶם:

And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.

Remember, they had experience God at Sinai as a volcano that zapped you if you got too close, so they were understandably nervous about having such power in the center of their community.

I think that many of us are also nervous and uncomfortable, even afraid, of having too much of the Divine Presence in the center of our community. While our ancestors experienced it at Sinai, as modern Jews, we have witnessed communities with God in the center turn to attack us, and others. We are understandably skeptical, and I believe that skepticism is holy and important.

And yet, we are a synagogue, and at the center of our community needs to be a sense of the sacred, of God. At the same time we don't want to move toward fanaticism or magical thinking. Having a synagogue gives us the opportunity to step into the sacred, to experience it, to be enriched by it, but then we go out into the world to do the work that needs doing to make this world a better place. The one informs the other.

We are about to begin the **Amida**, the series of prayers that the rabbis used to replace the sacrifices done in the Temple, or the Tabernacle. In many ways, the Amida is our time to **step into the holy of holies and into the presence of God.**

Yet, for many of us, while we stand, and bow, and sing the words as best we can, it hardly feels like stepping into the presence of the Divine. It feels like mumbo-jumbo. So tonight, as we install our new board, I wanted to encourage you to actually imagine, when we start the Amida, imagine stepping into the presence of the divine, into the inner sanctum of the Tabernacle, and feel the light of the divine within us.

And the first three prayers of the Amida speak directly to our Board, and our mission.

The **Avot v'Imahot** connects us to the long line of ancestors that have prayed, have kept us alive, and whose legacy and tradition we are trying to pass on to the next generation. We do that through our school, through Torah study, through Brisket Bake-Offs and Purim Spiels, and the Board is charged with fulfilling that duty. **L'dor v'dor, from generation to generation**, as our ancestors bequeathed Torah to us in times of great change, so, too, in this time of great change may we continue to pass it forward to generations yet to come.

The **Gevurot** speaks to powers that are beyond us, like the creation of life and death. Synagogues are places where our people celebrate birth, mourn deaths, and together as a community, honor those events and milestones that define our lives.

And the **Kedusha** speaks to that experience of the holy that sometimes happens in prayer, sometimes on hikes, sometimes during intimate times with loved ones, and often in the presence of life and death. Like love, it is not a rational experience, but it is profoundly powerful and a core dimension of being human.

As we rise and begin the AMIDA tonight, I want you to take **three very small steps forward**, as if you are entering the **mishkan, the holy of holies**, and as you **bow, try and open up and let a sense of something greater, a sense of God enter your heart, and grow so that your prayers become part of making a sacred community at the heart of our congregation.**

**Without a sacred community in our center**, we are just a glorified community center or club, and while those things are great, **a Temple, a synagogue can be so much more** if we can just get **out of the way of our own cynicism, and our own fear that we seem silly, and let the light of the divine fill us.**

**As we pray, also pray that this Board be blessed and carried by a sense of what is holy in the world, what is sacred to us, and that together, we create this sacred community, this dwelling place of the divine in our midst.**

In the words of Pirkei Avot, ***“When two people sit together and there are words of Torah between them, the Shechinah (Divine Presence) dwells among them.***  
(Pirkei Avot 3:2)

## PART II – THE CHARGE

We now ask everyone who is not on the Board, to come up and unfurl our community tallit, made by our religious school many years ago. Now I want the Board to come under the tallit. Now, I want you to offer them your own words of blessing, encouragement, and support, by speaking out some of the qualities we want in this community and in this board, some of your hopes for them, and for our community....

Now repeat after me:

*Holy One of Blessing, bless these leaders, who have stepped forward to serve our congregation. Instill in them insight, understanding, perseverance and patience.*

*Inspire them to work together with us to create a sacred community, to realize our highest aspirations for our congregation.*

*Grant success to their endeavors, and help them to lead us in the building of our mishkan, our sanctuary. Together may we fulfill our sacred mission.*

Now we invoke the ancient blessing of our tradition:

יְבָרֵךְ יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֵךְ:  
 יְאֵר יְהוָה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וַיַּחַנְךָ:  
 יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ  
 וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם:

May God bless and keep you. (*ken y'hi ratzon*)

May God's light shine upon you, and be gracious to you. (*ken y'hi ratzon*)

May you feel God's Presence within you always, and may it give you peace. (*ken y'hi ratzon*)

SONG: **Shecheheyanu**

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהַחַיִּינוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ  
וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזִמְן הַזֶּה.

Now lets roll the tallit back up so we can dance in celebration:

SONGS: **Heveinu Shalom Aleichem, Hava Nagila.**