



“The Torah Speaks in the Language of Humanity”¹

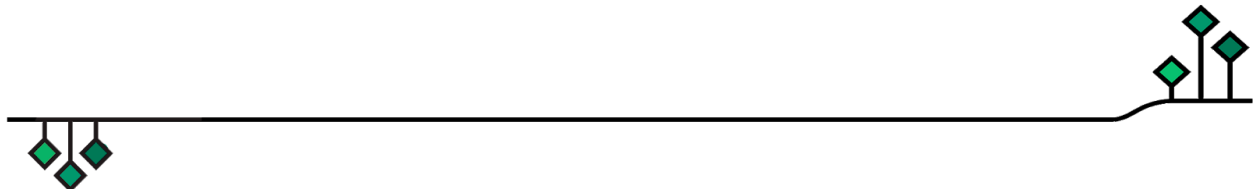
R. Yitz Greenberg – ygreenberg@hadar.org

Parashat Terumah 5781

In the last sections of the book of Exodus, the Torah’s focus switches from the epic Exodus journey and entering into covenant. Instead, these chapters deal with the construction of the tabernacle (*mishkan*) and its appurtenances, down to the nuts and bolts. But if we look beyond the details, this new focus teaches us an important lesson about how Torah can reach people even today.

The Torah dwells lovingly upon the details of the ark, curtain, table, *menorah*, the beams, pillars, and foundation, as well as the priestly vestments. It describes the dimensions of each and the materials from which they were made. It tells of the amounts of gold, silver, and brass used and their value. It then describes the actual construction of the items. Finally, a third time, the narrative describes putting the whole sanctuary together and installing everything

¹ Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 31b. As presented by Heschel, a major school of rabbinic interpretation stresses that the Torah speaks in the language of the people so interpretation should not over determine the nuances of words and their meanings; see Abraham J. Heschel, *Heavenly Torah* (Continuum, 2005). I am using the phrase to stress that in each generation and civilization, the Torah should be articulated in the language that best speaks to people in that time.

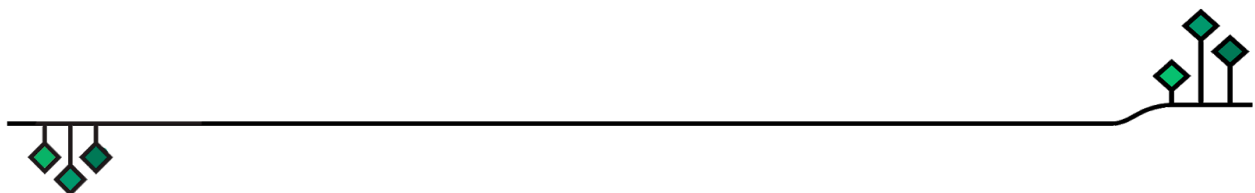


in its place. The dedication process climaxes with a cloud of glory over the *mishkan* and the Divine Presence saturating the building.

Both *midrash* and modern critical studies identify these repetitious sections as part of the priestly Torah (as is the Book of Leviticus with its sacrifices, which is called *Torat Kohanim*). Still, although I am personally of priestly descent and love the privilege given me to bless the people with the priestly benediction, this multi-chapter treatment is a bit much. Why do we need to know that the total gold used in the sanctuary and ritual objects added up to “twenty nine talents and seven hundred and thirty *shekels*...” whereas the silver used added up to “one hundred talents and one thousand, seven hundred and seventy five *shekels*?” (Exodus 38:24-25).

Perhaps my low level of interest simply reflects my own cultural mindset. The Israelites who received the Torah loved the minutiae, doting on every detail of the Torah’s account, including that the screen for the gate of the *mishkan* courtyard was beautiful embroidery of “blue, royal purple, scarlet and fine twined linen” (38:18). For them, this was how you heighten access to God—a spiritual, non-material Presence—through external architecture.

This recalls Maimonides’ teaching that the Torah offers sacrifices as a central worship mechanism because belief in the efficacy of sacrifices was so strong in the culture in which biblical Israel lived. In Maimonides’ thinking, sacrifice was not the highest level of divine service—in fact, not up to the level of communicating with God through prayer and silence.



Nevertheless, he says, if the Torah had not included sacrificial rituals it would have had little credibility or impact on the Israelites or other people at that time.²

I had always read Maimonides' judgment as a downgrade of the liturgical value of sacrifices; now, I understand he was offering an implied counter-message. The Torah was given as an act of love by the Lord. As we say in the daily liturgy, "With everlasting love you loved your people, the house of Israel. Therefore, you taught us Torah and *mitzvot*."³ In giving over a message to a loved one, there is a push to focus on what is of greatest interest and will be most pleasurable to the other. The Torah dwells on tabernacle and sacrifices because these gave the Israelites the sense that they were truly in touch with God and earning divine blessing, forgiveness, and love through the sacred activities.

There is also a pull in this direction because people hear divine revelation only to the extent of their capacity and maturation. The Torah expanded its treatment of sanctuary and sacrifice because the people listened more deeply and responded more fully to requests in this religious area. The proof is that giving to the building of the tabernacle was purely voluntary; yet the appeal for the tabernacle was so oversubscribed that the creators had to ask the people to stop bringing their offerings (Exodus 36:5-7).

Do my reservations mean that these chapters of the Torah are so culture bound that they no longer move us? Since these commandments are not so resonant, is the Torah left behind in the ancient Mesopotamian religious setting? The answer in actual history is: no. Unlike its

² See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, part 3, ch. 32. In his words "to discontinue all these manners of service... would have been contrary to the nature of man, who generally cleaves to that to which he is used..."

³ Koren Sacks *Daily Prayer Book*, Maariv, p. 244.



contemporary ancient Near Eastern religious texts, many of the Torah’s passages are being taught and continue to resonate—some even more powerfully—in our very different culture. This is the role of interpretation and of a community of tradition: to continue to study and understand the Torah’s words and values so they apply to our times. This continuous rearticulation moves people to live covenantally and keep the Torah as a guide to living as well as play their part in the ongoing movement toward *tikkun olam*, world repair.

The effect of placing the Torah so firmly in the context of each generation is maximum impact and real life influence in that time. The cost is implicating the tradition in a system which may depart from the Torah’s fundamental standards or ultimate goals, because the Torah functions within that system.⁴ This means that the Torah’s rulings—the *halakhah*—is in many cases not the ideal religious response but the best possible compromise between the ideal and the real. The guideline is to do what is possible to do, given the *modus operandi* and assumptions of the local culture. The Messianic standards—articulated in the prophetic writings and in the ideal institutions places in each generation to manifest the ultimate standard⁵—continue to serve as attractors, pulling the covenant practice toward the ideal standards when upgrading becomes possible. Those who treasure Torah must revisit the traditions and rulings continuously to make sure that they are recalibrated closer to the Torah’s ideals.

There is one more implication of this analysis. Far from ghettoizing, the interpreters and spiritual leaders should seek maximum penetration of the Torah in the local, generational

⁴ See the examples in my essay on Parashat Mishpatim, “The Book of the Covenant,” available here:

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/book-covenant>

⁵ Shabbat as a day of Messianic anticipation and Yovel/Jubilee as exemplifying the future economic equality.



culture. They have to articulate and bring out to the greatest extent possible the Torah’s meaning in the current civilization. The more the tradition can be expressed in the contemporary idiom, the more it can serve as a light for the whole nation. The eternity of the Torah—and the continuity which will enable reaching the covenantal goals—is best realized, not by staying out of the time and avoiding the ceaseless development of culture, but by expounding the tradition and living it fully in each era and time.

This approach raises the danger of simply identifying Torah with the local culture. This can lead to diluting the tradition and turning it to parroting the superficial and the trendy. Unchecked, such conformism will lead to assimilation and loss of distinctiveness. Therefore, when the local civilization is one-sided, or shallow, or excessively materialistic or universalistic, we must strive to expound the Torah as a counter-culture.

The eternity and the immediacy of the Torah is best upheld when the Torah is illuminated by the best in ethics and knowledge of the current culture, and the culture is reviewed and explicated by the best in Torah. The Torah’s dialectic of revolutionary utopian goals and gradualist, traditionalist, family-centered process will make its greatest contribution when it is applied to all aspects of current civilization. This will assure that Torah is not party line liberal or conservative. Torah should blend and critique and enrich all classes and all categories of understanding. Such a Torah becomes not a foreign body in the body politic, but a religious and moral home for God, even as it infuses divine justice and love into the culture and the living generation. If we engage the current culture deeply—but also correctly—then we can repeat, spiritually, the goal of this week’s *parashah*: “They shall build me a sanctuary/a home and I [God] shall dwell in their midst.” (Exodus 25:8).

