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## Torah Talk: Terumah

by Richard S. Ellis

Immediately, this week's portion confronts us with its specificity:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts.... And these are the gifts that you shall accept from them: gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats' hair; tanned ram skins, dolphin skins, and acacia wood; oil for lighting, spices...; lapis lazuli.... (Exodus 25:1-7)

Dolphin skins in the middle of the desert? Why, at this juncture in the desert wanderings of the newly freed slaves, does God command them to "make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them," with a cover of pure gold, a table of acacia wood, and a menorah of pure gold? Just the instructions for building the sanctuary, the tabernacle as it is called, take up all of Chapter 26. It seems incongruous and even irrelevant.

One answer is given by commentators who point out a literary device used by the Torah and rediscovered by modern literature; namely, the violation of chronological time. The event of the golden calf is narrated in the portion of *Ki Tissa*, which appears in the text as the second portion after *Terumah*. Nevertheless, these commentators claim, and cite internal evidence in the text to support their claim, that actually the golden calf was molded and worshipped by the people and then destroyed by Moses just before the portion of *Terumah*. According to this interpretation, the event of the golden calf made God realize that the people needed tangible symbols of the divine presence. Hence the tabernacle, the gold of which would atone for the gold of the calf.

The obvious contrasts between the orgy of the golden calf and the building of the tabernacle emphasize a key aspect of Jewish worship. The golden calf represents ecstasy and excess. God does not want us to serve Her that way. As God indicates by the detailed instructions concerning the tabernacle and its accessories, God wants us to serve Her with precision and with our intellects.

As for the tabernacle, make it of ten strips of cloth; make these of fine twisted linen.... The length of each cloth shall be twenty-eight cubits, and the width of each cloth shall be four cubits.... The length of each plank shall be ten cubits and the width of each plank a cubit and a half. (Exodus 26:1-2, 26:16)

Although on the level of a literal reading *Terumah* may tantalize us with its specificity, we are ready to search for a deeper connection. Let us pause, shut our eyes, and meditate on the meaning of the symbols. Let us begin to understand how our lives and these symbols are entwined. Tabernacle, I say to myself, *mishkan*, and I hear *Shekhinah*, the divine presence. Although I cannot build a tabernacle with a cover of pure gold and a table of acacia wood, I will try to make my home a tabernacle, suffused with God's light. I will try to make my life a tabernacle as I try to open myself to God's blessings every moment.

Menorah, your name is so soft. Until reading *Terumah*, I didn't know that you are alive.

Its base and its shaft, its cups, calyxes, and petals shall be of one piece. Six branches shall issue from its sides... On one branch there shall be three cups shaped like almond-blossoms, each with calyx and petals, and on the next branch there shall be three cups shaped like almond-blossoms, each with calyx and petals; so for all six branches issuing from the lampstand. (Exodus 25:31-33)

Menorah, you are a flower of light, a tree of light, a tree of life, a scion of the tree in the middle of the inaccessible garden, a vessel into which God poured the light of creation. And God commands us to craft you as a living symbol of this creation, to teach us that creation did not just happen at the beginning of time but is occurring every moment. You are a symbol both of God's creativity and of our ability to participate in that creativity as an ongoing event.

In the middle of Chapter 25 of *Terumah*, God commands Moses to adorn the cover on the ark with two cherubim. As symbols of this week's portion, the wingspans of these cherubim extend from the creation of light in *Bereyshit* to the construction of Solomon's Temple and beyond. In its suggestion that the building of the tabernacle in the desert, the creation of light in *Bereyshit*, and the construction of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem are all interrelated and even, in some sense, simultaneous—in this playfulness with time the text itself shares in God's creativity too.