

SHABBAT VAYAKHEL-PEKUDEI 5780
REFLECTIONS FROM INSIDE OUR SACRED TENT
RABBI JONATHAN BLAKE
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Shabbat Shalom and welcome once again to our WRT Shabbat Live-Stream! It's good to be with you, even virtually. I hope you are safe and healthy and negotiating this challenge with as much hope and equanimity of spirit as you can muster.

Tonight we complete the Book of Exodus. For the last several weeks, we have been wandering in the wilderness, seeking shelter from the unknown. That, at least, is what our recent Torah portions have been telling us.

The major project undertaken by the Israelite community over these consecutive Torah portions is the building of a communal *Mishkan* or sacred dwelling place, sometimes also called an *Ohel Mo'ed* or Tent of Meeting — that portable sanctuary in the wilderness where God would dwell among the Israelites on their journeys

It is ironic that our portion speaks of a communal, public gathering space at a time when public gatherings are off-limits, when they carry

grave risks, when each of us is doing our part, our communal responsibility *not* to gather, not to worship together, not to come to our beautiful sanctuary to pray and sing and take shelter, and find comfort in the presence of our community.

The Torah recognizes that we *need* such spaces; that to be deprived of them is to feel isolated, even removed from the very presence of God who dwells among the people when we come together for a holy purpose

But, still, we are doing what we must, and it is heartening that we can utilize some technological innovations to bring us together in virtual space even when we can't convene in real space.

And, although the Torah emphasizes, in elaborate detail, all the physical elements of the *Mishkan* — its specific measurements, down to the very last cubit; its fabric curtains and wooden supports; its metal clasps and woven ornamentation; its copper vessels and the golden Ark of the Covenant at the heart of the structure... even, with all of this, if we read carefully, we can learn that the physical structure was not the *essence* of the *Mishkan*.

We can all certainly relate. Here I stand, in our beautiful sanctuary... But, as lovely and warm and inspiring as our building is—and it is—the building itself is not what makes WRT our spiritual home, *our* tent of meeting, our place for encountering the community and the Divine.

If we pay attention to what the Torah tells us about the Tabernacle, we learn that it is, rather, three other noteworthy aspects of the *Mishkan* that truly define the project as sacred and its purpose, Divine.

First, the Torah makes clear that contributing to, and constructing, and furnishing, and finishing the tent is a project shared among the entire community. Moses may direct the work, but every person is invited to donate precious resources toward the *Mishkan* — and “whosoever’s heart was moved,” the Torah says, gave, and supported, and sustained this project. I know from my years serving WRT that what makes *our* Mishkan special is so much more than our beautiful campus—it’s the way in which so many of *your* hearts and souls have given generously in supporting our mission. We need you, and we need each other, now more than ever. I want to say thank you to everyone who has asked how to reach out and sustain the community. I want to say thank you to everyone who has placed a

loving phone call, text, or email, checking in on a friend, a relative, a fellow congregant. It is this shared communal commitment that makes *our* tent holy. Starting earlier this week, and continuing for as long as our campus will remain closed for public gatherings, we will continue to share with our congregational community ideas for supporting the members of our extended community, whether that's through a contribution to Feeding Westchester, our local Food Bank, or the temple's own Hungry and Homeless Fund, which will provide for people in our community hit hard by the pandemic, or through virtual outreach. Each of us can give of ourselves in bringing a little bit of hope at this anxious time, a little bit of light in the darkness.

Secondly, I would invite us to note the verse in which God commands Moses to build the Tabernacle. In this instruction, God describes the blueprint for the Tabernacle as a *pattern*, the Hebrew word *tavnit*. A *Midrash* imagines that when God showed Moses the pattern for the Tabernacle, an image of the structure appeared before the prophet as a constellation of multicolored fire, almost like a hologram. Moses balked and said, "Where on earth am I going to get multicolored fire to build this thing?" To which God responded, "No, Moses! I have my materials; you'll use yours."

In this lesson, I think, the Rabbis are suggesting that we, human beings, have to do our best, with our earthly materials, to emulate the pattern that God has in mind for the world. So, we can't gather in our usual Tabernacle, in all its physical beauty, its wood and glass and fabric; instead, we have to follow the pattern by creating new ways of praying together — like this one. In virtual space, we create a pattern of the Tabernacle. We may not be able to replicate the look of WRT in our living rooms. But we *can* replicate, to the best of our ability, the *feel* of WRT, in our shared yearnings, in the *pattern* of our prayer, in our common hopes and dreams, in our shared will to overcome whatever challenge has been placed before us.

And finally, we should note well that when God invites the Israelites to build a *Mishkan*, a Tent of Meeting, it does not actually promise that, upon its completion, God will reside there. We do not, we cannot, build earthly structures that can contain God. What the Torah *does* promise is that if we build a Tabernacle after a Godly pattern, then God will dwell *among them*—among the people.

So where is God? Here in this sanctuary with me? Maybe, but certainly not exclusively. In fact, I need to tell you, it's lonely in here, and I miss you. What I do feel is that God is among us tonight, among the people - with you, with all of us. God is among the

infected in hospital beds, and among the quietly heroic doctors and nurses who are caring for them. God is among all those public health workers, scientists, and servants of the common good who are promoting a rigorous protocol to mitigate the spread of the disease; who are researching a vaccine and treatments to alleviate the damage; who are communicating honestly and without sensationalism about our responsibility to save and protect life as one human family, all in the same boat together.

V'asu li mikdash, v'sbachanti b'tocham, says God: “Build me a sanctuary, and I will dwell *among them*” - among the people, among us.

Dwell, O God, among us now, as we each seek shelter in our own Tabernacles of home and health and hope. Dwell with us, with our community, with all who need you most, in our time of shared need.

Let us say the words that are shared whenever a Book of Torah is completed. Now, as we finish the Book of Exodus, we say — *Chazak, Chazak, v'nitchazeik*: Be strong, be strong, and, together, we will give strength to one another. *Amen*.

Mi Chamocha, which I'm about to invite us to sing with me, is the song of a band of refugees making their way across a turbulent Sea. Once slaves to the tyranny of Pharaoh, the Israelites are now free; but they have a tremendous ordeal yet ahead of them.

Tonight we are observing **Refugee Shabbat**, in partnership with HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, WRT's partner agency in resettling refugees fleeing tragic and often genocidal conflicts in some of the world's most complicated and terrible places. Although we are concerned for our own health and safety right now, we must also remember that pandemic disease will afflict most severely those whose place in the world is already most vulnerable. Kelly, who co-chairs WRT's refugee resettlement effort, shared with me a brief-thought piece that I now share with you:

"TO THOSE WHO NOW HAVE 28 PACKAGES
OF PASTA. TO THOSE WHO ARE SEARCHING
THE BLACK MARKET FOR HAND SANITIZER.
TO THOSE WHO WALK AROUND WITH A FACE
MASK. AND TO THOSE WHO ARE PLANNING
TO FLEE WITH THEIR KIDS OUT OF A
CORONA INFECTED AREA:

NEVER AGAIN LOOK DOWN ON PEOPLE WHO
FLEE FROM WAR AND FAMINE"

We join in singing *Mi Chamocha*, page _____.