



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Session 19 T'ruma—Offering from the Heart & Dwelling Within

שמות כה

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. ב דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ-לִי תְרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְבְּנוּ לִבּוֹ תִקְחוּ אֶת-תְּרוּמַתִּי. ג הִנֵּה אֵת הַתְּרוּמָה אֲשֶׁר תִּקְחוּ מֵאֵתָם זָהָב וְכֶסֶף וְנַחֲשֵׁת. ד וְתַכְלֵת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי וְשֵׁשׁ וְעִזִּים. ה וְעֹרֹת אֵילָם מְאֻדָּמִים וְעֹרֹת תַּחֲשִׁים וְעֻצֵי שִׁטִּים. ו שֶׁמֶן לְמָאֹר בְּשִׁמִּים לְשֶׁמֶן הַמִּשְׁחָה וְלִקְטֹרֶת הַסַּמִּים. ז אַבְנֵי-שֹׁהַם וְאַבְנֵי מְלֵאִים לְאַפֵּי דָלָח וְלַחֲשֵׁן. ח וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשִׁכְנָתִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם. ט כֹּכֹל אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מֵרְאֶה אוֹתְךָ אֵת תְּבִנֹת הַמִּשְׁכָּן וְאֵת תְּבִנֹת כָּל-כְּלָיו וְכֵן תַּעֲשׂוּ.

Exodus 25

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ² Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him/her. ³ And these are the gifts that you shall accept from them: gold, silver, and copper; ⁴ blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats' hair; ⁵ tanned ram skins, dolphin skins, and acacia wood; ⁶ oil for lighting, spices for the anointing oil and for the aromatic incense; ⁷ lapis lazuli and other stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breast-piece. ⁸ And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.

Context

Parashat T'ruma elaborates the commandment to build a *mishkan*-tabernacle to contain the sacred divine presence dwelling in the midst of the community. Everyone is to contribute. The text gives a relatively detailed description of the contents and structure, the drapings, vessels, and instruments. The first item is the ark, at the inner core—all parts are built from wood, and completely overlaid with gold leaf. From between the wings of the golden *keruvim*—creatures facing one another on the top of the ark, God will speak. The table for the showbread is wood with gold leaf; its tools, and the elaborate *menora*-lamp-stand are pure gold. The enclosure is a wooden frame made from interlocking planks, hung with fine linen weavings—decorated with blue, purple and scarlet red, and the image of the *keruvim*. Within the enclosure, the tent is covered with animal hides. The dimensions and materials are precisely indicated, including the details of the silver loops and copper pegs.

Explorations

God instructs the collection of donations from every member of the Children of Israel in order to build the Tabernacle-*Mishkan*,

Speak to the Children of Israel and they should take for me a donation; from each person whose heart moves her/him you should take a donation for me. (Exodus 25:2)

This verse contains a paradox—while there is a commandment to *take* the gifts, the express



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intention is that each person should *offer* her or his donation freely, voluntarily. Here, the Torah conceives giving quite differently from in our culture. Living in the Israelite community, each person implicitly expects and is expected to contribute to the shared undertaking. The *mishkan* is both a divinely instructed project and an expression of Israelite life together. Unlike our societies, there is no assumption about personal entitlement to control and use individual resources independently of those in whose midst we live. Rather, there seems to be an awareness of interdependence, of participating in a shared process that makes claims on all and benefits all. Therefore, appointing people to collect/ “take” the offerings can be done with confidence that each person will give willingly, with desire. In these verses, commandment, duty, and free will appear to work without contradiction. The obligation to give matches with desire to give.

The Torah lists numerous materials that the people are to collect from one another. The list draws from different aspects of Creation toward the sacred purpose: precious metals and stones from within the earth; fabrics, oils, and spices derived from plants and fruit that grow on the land; dyes extracted from sea-dwelling creatures; and skins from animals. These materials represent the diversity of the world and of the people, each person choosing to contribute according to her or his desire. Reb Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810), the great grandson of the founder of hasidism, interprets the symbolism of the process of offering materials.

God commanded every single Israelite to bring a gift according to her/ his heart toward the building of the tabernacle because it aroused the goodness in each person. Every one according to the good that s/he has, brought a good offering from his/her heart toward the building, since the tabernacle is built from all of the good that is discerned from every one among [the people of] Israel. And that is the aspect of, “gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns” etc. (Ex. 25:3-4) that every single person brought according to her/his goodness. The gold and silver etc. are the sublime diverse aspects of goodness that are in each and every one of Israel, and Israel contains all of the diverse, exalted aspects of goodness—and that is the Israel through whom [God] will be glorified. Even the most humble one has goodness. . . . And that is the aspect of the diversity within the tabernacle, gold and silver etc.—it comes from the offering from the heart of each member of Israel. (*Liqutei Halakhot*, Morning Wake-up, halakha 1,4, my rendering)

Each person has the potential to give something unique, a distinct contribution offered toward building the sacred enclosure. This act of giving contains two discreet and connected kinds of investigations:

- discovering what is one's unique contribution; and, at the same time
- assessing the offerings and contributions of the others such that one's own contribution will complement the others, and it will be possible to build the *mishkan*.

Since all of the different offerings are needed in the appropriate proportions, self awareness is not sufficient—people must be aware of each other, and appreciate all of the gifts. Each



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different material is valuable—gold is no more necessary than wood for the frame or dye for the cloth. By extension, the uniqueness of every person is precious, for the diversity of people is the source for the diverse offerings; each contributes meaningfully to the collective purpose, both to the community and to divine service.

The purpose for building the sanctuary seems explicit— so that God can dwell in the midst of the people.

*And they should make for me a *mishkan*-sanctuary and I will dwell in them.* (Exodus 25:8)

In this verse, God speaks about an intention to live among the people. The word *mishkan*, dwelling place, shares the root of the verb, “to dwell.” Rashi rebels against the message that God has some material aspect that can abide in a material place, and insists that the verse refers to making a sanctuary dedicated to the sacred *Name* (on Sh. 25:8). Ibn Ezra agrees that the sacredness of the place has to do with the sacred Name. Ramban, on the other hand, states that it is fitting for the Israelites to build a place for the divine Shekhina to rest among them in view of the sacred covenant that the people have made with the divine partner. He adds that the divine will be housed there above the holy Ark, and for that reason, the instructions for the *mishkan* begin with the building of the Ark, the essence of the project (on Ex. 25:1). Ramban seems to suggest that there is to be some manifestation of divine presence beyond speech and the sanctification of the Name.

In the Torah, most Hebrew nouns, pronouns, and concepts of the divine are grammatically masculine. This and other biblical sites suggest the *Shekhina*—the divine presence who dwells among us; She tends to be gendered female. By the Talmudic period, there are many references to the Shekhina. Among her attributes, she seems to be kind and empathic, concerned with the wellbeing of people, their public and private experiences,

"Whenever ten are gathered for prayer, there the Shekhina rests" (Sanhedrin 39a)

"When three sit as judges, the Shekhina is with them." (Brachot 6a)

"The Shekhina dwells over the head of the sick-person's bed." (Shabbat 12b)

One of the prevalent aspects of the Shekhina is that She goes into exile with the Jewish People after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., and lives among the dispersed communities, awaiting the return to Jerusalem,

"Wheresoever they were exiled, the Shekhina went with them." (Megillah 29a)

On the other hand, some sages such as Rav Acha state that the Shekhina never leaves the holy site of the Jerusalem Temple.

The Shekhina never departs from the Western Wall, as it says, “Here he stands behind our wall” (Song of Songs 2:) (Shmot Rabba, parasha 2, 2)

Compared with a transcendent God-beyond-this-world, these statements seem to point to a more personal, involved divine presence. The *mishkan* opens the way for the divine to be here, holy within us, in our midst. Once the Jerusalem Temples replace the *mishkan*, She



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abides within the inner sanctuary until the destruction. When the Jewish People are sent into exile, She disperses with them. The Shekhina is somehow located in space, in many locations simultaneously, wheresoever Her presence is fervently desired in the appropriate sacred conditions.

The reasons for the association between the immanent divine and the female and between the transcendent divine and the male are cultural. For too long, female has been typed receiver, material, vulnerable, permeable, and passive etc., while male is giver, abstract, potent, solid, and active etc. This typology is often thought to be rooted in biology, in the structure of the universe, the cosmos, creation. Many literatures replicate and reinforce these stereotypes, subtly easing them into core assumptions of society. Though many would claim that men and women contain both female and male aspects, the overall outcome is that the stereotypes slip into self-fulfilling beliefs that men embody the male concepts, and women embody the female ones.

Even at the basic level of biology, male-female dualism is mistaken. Primitive scientific theories that dominated through the 17th century asserted that the female womb passively receives the new miniature human from the male, and merely supplies the ground in which his sperm grows. As closer observation became possible with the development of finer microscopic instruments, scientists realized that the female not only gestates, births, and nurtures new life, but contributes half of the genetic material—the ovum, and enables conception altogether. Giving and receiving, female is at least as active and potent a *cause* of life as male. Yet the stereotypes last on, for they support the gendered power relations of the status quo.

The Torah specifies the place in the *mishkan* from which God speaks—from between two figures called *keruvim* who stand atop the ark.

The keruvim will spread their wings upwards, their wings interwoven above the kaporet (covering); their faces are turned towards each other; the faces of the keruvim will be toward the kaporet. And I will testify to you there and I will speak to you from above the kaporet from between the two keruvim . . . (Exodus 25:20, 22)

According to Rashi, the *keruvim* have children's faces. Ramban imagines their bodies as bird-like. By these views, the *keruvim* model genderless equality and reciprocity. The talmud interprets the *keruvim* differently. In one passage, the Gemara explains that when the Jewish people would perform the commandments, the *keruvim* would face each other, and when not, the *keruvim* turn away from each other (Baba Batra 99a). A different passage describes the *keruvim* embracing one other (Yoma 54a). In that place, Rashi describes them clinging together, caressing like lovers. The symbolism is not explicit, but is often interpreted to allude to the relationship between God and the Jewish People, between the divine male and female Shekhina. The allegory of lovers is an abiding metaphor for our relationship with the divine, among Jews, and many religious peoples. The Song of Songs is the primary source for this metaphor, where too often the eros and sensuousness of the text fades into an abstract divine-human allegory.

Regarding the concept of Shekhina as the female divine, often we make similar assumptions



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about God as about humanity; we project similar gender attributes onto God as we do onto each other. As the *mishkan* project develops in the coming parashot, let us try to be open to unfolding the meaning of the divine dwelling among us, aware of gender issues, and free ourselves from limiting stereotypes.

Questions for Discussion

1. Reflect on your unique gifts—skills, talents, and personality. What gift can and do you offer that benefits your community and its sacred, social, health, education etc. services? Notice and appreciate someone else’s talent and encourage them to apply it in the service of community.
2. To what extent do the roles and life purposes you envision for yourself and others have anything to do with gender? If yes, why, and is it justified? How, if at all, would you like to modify these attitudes or beliefs, in yourself, and in others?
3. Parashat T'ruma focuses on creating sacredness using physical materials. Explore ways that you use physical materials for sacred purposes. How might you heighten your awareness and practice of sacred service in the ways you relate to your body and the environment?
4. Discuss how *love* relates to your views and/or connections with the divine and sacred experience?
5. How can we relate more fully to each other as unique contributors rather than relating through categories of our identities (gender, nationality, class, status) or as instruments –such that sacredness might dwell more among us?

Study Links

In many of our societies, governments offer tax-deduction incentives to encourage people to make contributions to non-profit projects. [Here](#) is an essay evaluating various strategies for treating Public Benefit Organizations.

In his book about the *Shabbat in Classical Kabbalah*, [Elliot Ginsberg mentions](#) fluidity in the assignment of gender to the mystical divine emanations, the *sefirot*, including the Shekhina—based on their behavior as receptacles of the divine outpouring of creation effluent (see footnote 21).

Rabbi Jill Hammer's essay about the Shekhina as a traditional earth-based divine concept is [here](#). Compare her views with others that have arisen while studying this parasha.



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Summary of Issues

Regarding the concept of Shekhina as the female divine, often we make similar assumptions about God as about humanity; we project similar gender attributes onto God as we do onto each other.

Methods & Observations

Though the Torah does not explicitly mention the existence of a distinct female divine presence, commentators and sages speak about Her as if knowledge of Her exists without explanation or justification. The idea of the Shekhina might be one interpretation that coexists with the Torah, that has accompanied the Torah throughout Jewish history.

Contact

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