

Terumah 5782
That Good Feeling
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For a couple of days last week, I worked from Arizona so Scott and I could visit his sister and her husband there. As we made our descent to the Phoenix airport my mind flashed to our parashah. I imagined what it would be like if a group of people set out to construct a tabernacle in the Sonoran desert today like they did in the Sinai wilderness. It occurred to me that no one else on the plane had that thought.

We read the plans for the construction of the Mishkan, altar, and sacrificial vessels in a week where Whoopie Goldberg was suspended from her position as a talk show host because she failed to understand that the Holocaust was about race and not simply a white-on-white atrocity. Tracking the Whoopie updates with the parashah in mind, I felt a particular sort of tension: on one end the flurry of public statements and a pileup of online discussions in reaction to Ms. Goldberg's mistake, public apology, and suspension; and on the other end, the lavish, focused attention our ancestors bestowed upon the sacred task of building a home for God to dwell in their midst. We live in a world in which we are a small and wary minority, while our hearts preserve the memory of thick and joyful ethnicity.

On Monday, my day off, I walked the desert path to the pool in my sister-and-brother-in-law's development. After swimming some laps, I settled happily into the hot tub. My mindless moment was soon interrupted by the arrival of an older man from Illinois whose daughter happened to have graduated from the UW-Madison.

After he asked what I do and I told him that I am a Rabbi, the man felt compelled to tell me about his interactions with Jews. First, he talked about a time when he refereed a middle school basketball game between a team of mostly scrawny Jewish kids representing the day school my kids attended and where I worked for many years, and a team of mostly Black kids who looked to him like they had the physical ability to win the game. He described how, despite their small stature—he seemed careful to avoid saying “wimpy”—the Jewish team was impressively “organized,” the players, having mastered their moves, executing strategically and precisely up and down the court. He told me how much their “organization” impressed him. I wanted to believe he would have said the same thing about a team from a Catholic school, but I wasn't sure.

My new friend went on: the Black kids beat the Jewish kids at the buzzer. As he and his co-referee headed to the parking lot, some of the Jewish parents approached them angrily. “You called a bunch of fouls against our kids' team,” they complained, “but none

against the other team.” Pool Guy told me he realized they were right. He looked at me for a response. I offered, “There’s a lot beneath the surface that affects what we see, isn’t there?” and he said, “There sure is. I learned from that.”

Not the experience I was going for in the Arizona desert, but interesting.

Turns out he had more to tell me.

“My first roommate at Northwestern University was a Jewish kid,” he said, “not just a Jewish kid, but I mean, he was really…” “Observant?” I offered. Pool guy answered with another story. He told me that around 5:00 in the morning of their first day of college, in their dormitory room at Northwestern University, he was awakened early by the sound of his *tallit*-and-*tefillin*-wrapped roommate mumbling his way through *Shacharit*. “And his prayer book—he was reading from right to left!” the man told me. He added, “at that moment I did not think the roommate situation was going to work out.”

I thought about that kid getting up at 5:00 am to daven in his dorm room on his first morning of college. 5:00 is awfully early for a typical 18-year-old. It’s probably also about 45 minutes too early to *daven Shacharit* in Evanston at the end of August. If I were to guess, I’d guess that the Jewish kid did not want to be weird, so he figured he’d do his thing before his new roommate woke up.

Pool Guy then spoke of race, his concern for Blacks, and then Covid, and that was about enough hot tub for me. It’s not that he said the wrong things, exactly. It’s just that I wished that for twenty minutes I could have escaped the tension between the challenges of our particularity and the love and pride I feel for it.

Call us a race, or a religion, a nation, or a People. Each word has a context. None are wrong, none captures exactly who we are, and we have never been at ease. From our biblical origin stories to today, we have set ourselves apart to experience life in distinctly Jewish ways, and we have also been set apart overtly and tacitly, to our detriment.

In a world where we are always different, where people don’t know whether or not it’s appropriate to call us a race, where they—and sometimes we—are tempted to reduce us to “white;” where they—and sometimes we—are uncomfortable because of our particularity, how remarkable it is that we thrive. On a day when we read about the enthusiasm of our ancestors, it’s a good time to dig into how that happens. And it’s in the details.

Tuesday and Wednesday were *Rosh Chodesh*. How uncanny to be out there in the Arizona desert (not Sinai, after all), Zooming into minyan, building a sanctuary together—without walls, online, and very real. There we were, “all in our places with bright shining faces,” across 8 generations and 3 states, committed to spending an hour davening, reading Torah, reciting Hallel, taking off our *t’fillin* for *Musaf*, and kibitzing as Jews do after *minyan*. “ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם”-- make for me a sanctuary and I will dwell among you.”

During *minyan*, my thoughts flashed back to the Jewish kid davening at 5 o'clock in the morning in his dorm room. Beyond the ritual obligation he no doubt took seriously, I felt a closeness to that kid, imagining that he, too, was creating a sanctuary for God's presence to dwell with him, in an unfamiliar place.

Thinking about my own son, davening at Wash U, I imagined the other young man at Northwestern some three and a half decades earlier, connecting himself to his high school buddies, his camp friends, his teachers and his family as he wrapped his *t’fillin* and opened his *siddur*, just as my son did, and still does, and just as I was doing out there in Arizona when I was online davening with some of you.

We thrive by honoring our particularity and by doing so as part of a community in which we feel significant. I believe we're gathered here today (whatever “here” means), because we value the thickness of identity we experience as a *kahal* on Shabbat. For some of us the thickness lies in seeing friends in a distinctly Jewish space. Or it's hearing the words of our tradition, whether that means all of the davening, or especially the Torah service, or joining in *Kiddush*. We come because we know in our *kishkes* why we're here even if we can't explain it—because sharing a unique heritage and destiny feels too big, or cliché. But it's true, and it feels good to affirm our shared heritage and carve out our future.

Returning to Madison, I looked down from the plane as we made our descent and saw the isthmus, the capitol, the lakes I have come to know. I was struck by the wetness of it all—snow hugging grassy plots, fields, and forests. Just a little off to the left and down the road from my view lay our own little *Mishkan*, Beth Israel Center, amidst the icy wilderness of Wisconsin. Just knowing it was there filled me with a sense of belonging and home.

I thought about how we would come together today, as our biblical ancestors did, but differently. Some would bring gifts of excellent *leining* and others would daven in words and rubrics never imagined at Sinai. Some would bring conversation and others, activism. Some would bring curiosity and others, knowledge; some would bring giving

hearts and others, need. Most importantly, we'd be our Jewish selves, together, finding rootedness, joy, and purpose in doing the things Jews do.

Reflecting on the instructions given for the Mishkan in today's reading, our sages teach that we need not replicate the precise practice of our ancestors. If we gather with devotion, integrity, creativity and vision, then we will build a holy house, with and without walls, for the Divine presence to dwell and be felt among us.

The ornate trappings for the Mishkan that we read about today always seem unbelievably impressive: luxury metals, expensive yarns, rare woods, fancy skins, and more. Where would they get all that finery? How had they schlepped it through the desert? Our sages try to explain, but I have not found a satisfying explanation. And it doesn't matter, because the point, for us, I believe, is the sense of excitement and investment we experience when we read about it as beneficiaries of that shared sense of purpose that finds purchase in our own *kahal* today.

Rabbi Moshe Alshich, a 16th century sage, notes that the sanctity of the Mishkan is not due to its structure or to the materials from which it is built, but to the fact that the people reside around it; the real meaning of the tabernacle, in essence, is God's presence in the midst of the Jewish people. It is the interaction between God and Israel as a distinct nation that gives the Mishkan its spiritual agency. And I would say that for us, celebrating and honoring our distinctiveness together, with purpose, integrity, and creativity gives our Jewish lives their beauty and power.

We thrive when Sol goes up on the bimah to open the Aron and grabs the *parochet* in his signature ready-set-go move before revealing our Torah scrolls, *Baruch HaShem*. Throughout last Winter, when we met for our pre-Shabbat schmooze on Zoom and sat there with drinks and snacks at 3:30 on a Friday afternoon, while the rest of the world continued apace, oblivious to our just-before-Shabbat communion with each other, we were practicing thriving. We thrive when we like Hanukkah candles together, boo Haman on Purim, and when we stand together to hear the call of the *shofar*. We thrive from Shivas, *Tashlich* at the park, chuppas, brises and baby namings, *teiglach* and *kneidlach*, *Ne'ilah*, "gut Shabbos" and "gut yontif," Kiddush lunch, MOUSY, Kadimah, Jewish summer camp, marching together behind our Pride banner singing Oseh Shalom, studying *Tanakh*, *halachah*, and *Mussar*, throwing candy at b'nei mitzvah, and so much more. We thrive because of thick and sticky experiences we share when we do what we do as Jews, together.

This past Thursday evening, our member Steve Schwartz zoomed in from out of town for evening minyan. His mother, Sandie Schwartz, z"l's 10th *yahrzeit* is today, and Steve

wanted to share memories of her with his community before Shabbat. She would have been 90 now. Some of our minyaners remembered her, and her parents as well. Sandie was a staunch and active member of Beth Israel Center, serving on our Board and various committees. How beautiful it is to have a community that understands what it means to share memories on the *yahrzeit* of a parent like that.

The first thing Steve wanted to say was that his mother would have been amazed by the way we come together even now, despite the difficult circumstances. Well, she might have been amazed by the technology, but I don't think she'd be surprised, because coming together for a minyan and commemorating a *yahrzeit* are things Jews do. This is how we survive and this is how we thrive.

That good feeling that keeps us going has its roots in the exuberance of today's *parashah*.

In a world where Jews will always be looking over our shoulders, nothing could be more precious or more spiritually satisfying than treasuring our heritage and doing the things we do with integrity, freshness, and devotion. May that be our blessing.

Amen.