

Romemu Shabbat March 04, 2017 Sermon

Returning to Qumashim this morning to the Parsha, Parsha Truma on page 485. The Parsha this morning is the beginning of the latter third of the Book of Exodus. Torah will now turn its attention, as I said last night, to the construction of, or the instruction for the construction of the tabernacle, or the Mishkan.

And as I said also last night and this morning, as I repeated, the tabernacle's insertion here at this moment in the Torah is very, very odd indeed. It really doesn't make much sense. There's no prefiguring of it, there's no, actually, there's no, there's no vision or prophecy that exists in the Book of Genesis or earlier on in the Book of Exodus that would in any way indicate that we're about to receive instructions for something as important and as central to the Israelite experience in the desert as the tabernacle.

We, you know, we don't have it. If you read the narrative of the Torah, it reads seamlessly as if it is chronological and narratively coherent. We begin with the patriarchs, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We'll begin, actually, with Adam, but the story prefigured, right, the pre-Abrahamic moments, and then we arrive at our, kind of our lineage, who we are as a family, our roots. We have the fathers, we have the mothers, we have the children, we have all of that. We even have a prophecy from God to Abraham in the Book of Genesis telling us that we will be slaves in a land that doesn't belong to us.

Ge'er ye'ezer ha-be'erezt lo lahem, for 400 years. So the Book of Exodus kind of is prefigured already and really prophesized already in the Book of Genesis. We have the slavery, we have the prefiguring of and the letting us in on the mountain moment because early on in the Moses narrative, Steferi says, when we leave Egypt, we're going to arrive at a mountain and we'll serve God on that mountain.

So that kind of makes up for Parshat Yitro and Mishpatim. And we should, at this moment, turn our attention to the desert. Right, this is the moment where the Torah should actually now begin to narrate and what happens in the Book of Numbers, essentially. Like, you know, that makes the narrative coherent. Does that make sense to everybody? We're at Mount Sinai, and in the Book of Numbers, we will have a census, that's the way the book will begin. And then we'll move. We'll go to all of the 42 camps that we went to, all the moments, and then we'll arrive at Deuteronomy and we'll be in front of the land of Israel and we're going to go. But we interrupt this narrative coherence to give ourselves a full one-third of one of the five books of Moses with a story about a tabernacle in the wilderness that will then be the reason why we need the whole book of Leviticus. So a full book, one-fifth of the entirety of the five books of Moses is devoted to this strange temple in the desert, and one-third of the Exodus story is given to its construction.

And it just begs incredulity. Like, we're just thinking, well, first of all, we didn't see this coming. So it's a right angle at our experience. We're like, oh. And then it's also like, then the whole story just begs incredulity. It's like, there were dolphin skins? Acacia wood? Like, you had me with the splitting of the sea. That's miraculous. But, like, what's up with the acacia wood and the tolat shani and the worms? Like, what's going on here? How do you... Like, I can imagine, you know, the Israelites scratching their heads and going like, okay,

Moses, you know, we're going to build a structure, but we'll make it out of, like, rocks and cacti and something like that. You want us to build a structure with all of these things.

Pretty remarkable. Of course, the absolute narrative incoherence is what prompted Rashi and really the Midrash before Rashi, as I quoted last night, to insert an element of the narrative which comes later on in the story in order to make sense of this radical departure. Right? So what part did I say last night really should be here but is in Chapter 32? The golden calf story. So if one fast-forwards to Chapter 32, 33 and 34 of the Book of Exodus, we have this moment where the children of Israel are standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, Moses is receiving the Ten Commandments or the Ten Utterances or the Two Tablets, and... Moshe le'redet, and the nation saw, the people saw that Moses was not coming down the mountain, and, you know, they had anxiety. Ha'ish Moshe lo yodano ma hayalo. We didn't know what's going on with Moshe.

And they grab Aaron, right, we know the story, and Zanu, and they have this moment of deep infidelity with the divine. So Rashi inserts that, as it were, in between Mount Sinai and Tabernacle to say that the Tabernacle is... should never have been, basically. The Tabernacle in the desert is v'di avad. It's... It's an afterthought. The Tabernacle is a response to the golden calf. That's one approach that we talked about last night. One approach is that had they not sinned with the golden calf, there would never have been a need for the Tabernacle.

The Tabernacle becomes a corrective for whatever it is that they screwed up. The mess of the golden calf is addressed. That mess is addressed by the Tabernacle. Right, and the mess is that they needed something concrete. They needed something that they could see, they could hold on to. God was too abstract. Hil re'itim kol t'munah, you didn't see any image. And the people were saying, but we need an image. Can you give us something? We need something. Clearly, we don't really get that, and so we made a golden calf. So then, in the reading of Rashi, who is reading the Midrash very carefully, because the Midrash says, the Midrash on this week's Parsha, the rabbinic homilies in this particular period, 11th century, on this Parsha say that the Tabernacle relates to the verse in Song of Songs, Anigishena v'libi er.

I am asleep, but my heart is awake. And the Midrash says, I fell asleep because I gave up hope after I sinned with the golden calf. v'libi er, but God was awake, trying to awaken us and saying, pitkhili, wake up. I'm going to give you the Tabernacle. It'll fix everything. The Tabernacle is the refu'ah l'makah.

It is the medicine for the affliction of the need to concretize spirit, to reify it, to make it something. There were meditation teachers in the 60s and 70s who came along after the entire wave of the counterculture of Eastern religious thought, with Buddhist centers and Zen centers popping up. There were religious thinkers like Krishnamurti, J. Krishnamurti, who was a Hindu sage, he was an Indian, who had been seen as a god and he rejected his messianic status in his particular lineage, and decided that he would try to teach without any system whatsoever. He thought every single system leads to some idolatry, to some form. He said, even Zen, or even the most refined spiritual path can become something that we use as a way to get in the way of immediate experience of enlightenment. We, just by nature, that's the way that we do things.

So the Tabernacle was kind of like the way to say, if you're going to need something, at least let it be holy, not a golden calf. Now the Ramban, as I said last night, Maimonides, the Spanish commentator actually disagrees with Rashi and the reading of the Midrash. He says, you know, there is narrative coherence between Sinai and the Tabernacle, because what? The Tabernacle is? The Tabernacle is? I can't hear you. It's chronologically in order. It's in order, but the Tabernacle is connected to Sinai. It's not a departure from Sinai thematically because? Because it's a portable Sinai, right? The Tabernacle is not a corrective.

It wasn't actually something that responded to an event that said, you know, had it not been for that event, we wouldn't have a Tabernacle. No, we were always getting a Tabernacle. You know why? Because we needed to take Sinai with us, the moment of Sinai, the moment of revelation. Like the Tabernacle is the place, the locus of the Holy. So I want to read, right now, I just want to read through the prism of the Ego, through the Golden Calf. I want to read the first Aliyah this morning through the prism of that school of thought that says, had it not been for the Golden Calf moment, which will come later on in Torah and later on in the month, this month, we would not have needed a Tabernacle.

And I want to understand, not only the Tabernacle as a structure that allows us to have kosher idolatry, the Tabernacle as a source for kosher, state-sanctioned kosher idolatry. It neutralizes our inherent desire to make idols. It neutralizes by saying, there are some idols that are not kosher, and then there are some idols that are kosher, right? Right, that's basically what it's saying. Like, you know, there's like a hierarchy of idols. If you make a cow into an idol, that's not kosher. Right, but if you make the Torah into an idol, maybe it's kosher. Or if you make these tables that are, you know, gold tables, maybe that's okay, maybe. But I want to read the corrective, not just in that way, but I want to read the corrective as the Sfat Emet, the Sfat Emes, and others in the Hasidic tradition read, not just the construction of the Tabernacle, but how it was built. Not just that there was a Tabernacle, but how it was built.

It begins with the very first couple of verses. The second verse. Like, **וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הַמַּיִם לְמַוָּה, וַיִּבְרָא אֶת-הָאָרֶץ לְרֹמֵמוּ** The word Romemu comes from the word to lift up. Rom, Ram, high up, elevated. The word Shuma, which is the name of the parshat, Shuma means a gift that is elevated gift. They would, literally, they would elevate it. They say here.

But it's also a gift that elevates. In giving, we are elevated. Giving is something that elevates us, that takes us out of a place where we feel despair. And so, the Hasidic masters say, not only was the response to the need to have kosher idolatry the purpose of the tabernacle, but the way that the tabernacle was built, was built from giving. And that giving is a directly, is a direct source of wisdom for those who feel despondent, or split, or disconnected. Or feel that there's nothing for them to offer. The Torah says, you feel down, you want to lift up, you want to be elevated, give a gift. Forgiving, forgiving. You want forgiveness, start giving.

We had an amazing, there's an amazing, I can't remember her name. Somebody might remember her name. She was, wow, she was an amazing musician that came to Romemu when the... Morley came in. Morley. Morley.

So Morley, right, remember Morley, very good. Morley, wow, Morley was a powerhouse, wasn't she? Wow, that woman was amazing. She's just like a social justice, and, you know, this radical spiritual force. She used to come in, she had this amazing voice. Look her up after Shabbos, Morley. And she used to have this song about Aung San Suu Kyi.

And the story, and the song about her...