

Vayakhel Creative Speech and Integrated Diversity

ויקהל

Baruch Sha'amar ve'hayah ha'olam. Blessed is the one who spoke and the world came into being. That line from the liturgy, the prayers of the morning, is the beginning of tonight's journey together. Blessed is the one who spoke and whose speech creates. The Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, relates that once the British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who was a devout Bible reader, remarked to him, I've just come to the boring bit in my reading. Sachs replied, and I love this, which boring bit? He said, you know, the passage about the tabernacle at the end of Exodus. It goes on, doesn't it? You can almost hear him say, it goes on. Some 500 verses of the book of Exodus devoted to the tabernacle, the mishkan. By comparison, 34 verses are the number of verses it takes to create the world in the first chapter of Genesis. 34. 500 to build a tabernacle and 34 to create the world.

And of course, drawing a parallel between the creation story and the tabernacle itself is not something new. It isn't something that I came up with or Jonathan Sachs or anyone did. In fact, it's a very fabric and very basic element in rabbinic understanding is that if you read the text carefully, all 500 verses of Truma Tetzaveh, Vayakhel Tikudei, and a little bit of Kittisa, you see a remarkable similarity between the verses of the construction of the temple and the verses that describe the creation of the world. Very clearly, clearly making the parallel that to create the world and to create a mishkan, a tabernacle, are wedded together, are two processes that are really one process.

And so how did Tony Blair deal with that discrepancy? I'm sorry, how did Rabbi Jonathan Sachs deal with that discrepancy? And so he writes beautifully. His answer to Tony Blair was that it is not difficult for an omniscient, omnipotent God to create a home for humankind, for humanity. What is difficult is for the finite, fallible human being to create a home for God. He writes, this tells us that the Bible is not man's book of God but God's book of humanity. Ultimately, Jonathan Sachs says, what God is interested in is how we create, not how God creates. So what is it, this creation, and what are some of the basic elements of creating a mishkan, and how does it parallel creating a world, and what does it mean for us day to day?

On the simplest level, we can begin with what I began with, that we have a God who speaks. And speaking in biblical terminology, speech is not arbitrary, speech is not utilitarian, it isn't perfunctory, speech is nothing less than creation. To speak is to dare to make visible the invisible, to make known the unknown, to come from that which is obscured on the inside to that which can be seen on the outside. Speech is nothing less than the very fabric of creation. How we speak, what we speak, to whom we speak it, and when we speak it.

The second principle of creativity that emerges from the creation story and from the mishkan is something that is called by some integrated diversity, or building a home together, that's another way of saying it, or all things are held by a common good. So I want to zero in on both of these points, speech as creativity and integrated diversity.

It would surprise some of you to know that in our tradition there is a magical incantation, it goes, Abra-Kedabra. Abra-Kedabra, magicians have it on good faith, there's a lineage, there's a Masoret, that Abra-Kedabra means in Aramaic, Abra-Kedabra, I will speak and I will create through my speech. Abra, from the word bara, is to create, Kedabra, through dibur, through speech. In fact, there is no such word in the Hebrew language for thingness. Go find it, it doesn't exist. There are no things in Hebrew, how do we say a thing in Hebrew? It is a davar, d-a-v-a-r, davar, which many Rebbas and many Hasidic teachers say that the word davar, which means inanimate, or a davar is a thing, comes from the same root as dibur, speech. Things speak to us if we listen.

The world is full of teachers and possibilities, and how painful it is to open the newspaper, to open your favorite blog, and for what is, without a doubt, an assault on the fundamental principle of our tradition, that with creative speech a world is, comes into being a world as manifest, to see the flippancy, to see the vulgarity of speech that is not skillful. Everywhere I look, I'm looking for some common thread, what is going on? What has happened to discourse? What has happened to decency in speech? Do we realize the effects of what it is that we say and write? Is it possible for us to reclaim speech as vitally potent, as an act of creativity, no less than the creation of the manifest universe?

The Rabbis teach us that this week we're going to be reintroduced to someone who is the one to whom is the artist, he's the artisan of the tabernacle. His name is B'tzal El. Re'ei Natati, I have given you B'tzal El, this character, B'tzal El, this great artisan who knows how to make a mishkan, to make a tabernacle, a dwelling place. In the Gemara, the Talmud says, what was B'tzal El's secret? B'tzal El, the Talmud says, knew how to bring letters together. He knew what it was to reconnect fragmented speech, to recontextualize verbs, adjectives, nouns that have no place. B'tzal El is the key to creating a tabernacle, he knows how to work with language. So if we work from the world outside to the world inside, because we know, as our wisdom masters teach us, there is a tabernacle outside and a tabernacle inside, we are enjoined, we are invited to do nothing less than B'tzal El.

When we close our eyes at the end of a long day, or in the middle of a busy day, what are the letters and words that are forming within? The Dalai Lama said, if you want to do good work in the world, what we'll call tikkun olam, he didn't say tikkun olam, I'm sure, if you want to alleviate suffering would be the trope of our Buddhist friends. If you want to make a difference in the world, begin with compassion within your own heart. To the extent of the Dalai Lama that you have insight into your own suffering, your heart can open to empathize with those who are suffering, who are, quote unquote, not you. So what words do you use to create your world? We begin with non-violent communication within, and then expand to non-violent communication without.

And the second theme, integrated diversity. Integrated diversity means that, and I have to read this quote to you if I can find it, from Buckminster Fuller, unity is plural and at minimum two. Unity is plural and at minimum two. Amazing to watch the evolution of the Jewish people in the Bible, to watch them go from a band of 12 disparate groups, arguing, complaining, schlepping, annoyed, every moment, fetching, this hurts, that hurts, I wish I was back there, I wish I was going forward, I wish, I wish, I wish, and all of a sudden, this week, the tabernacle arrives, and Vayakhel Moshe. Moshe asked them to become a

community, asked them to become one unified group. It was in finding a larger purpose, a larger center point, that these disparate groups could come to a center. They could come together. They could rally around, not tolerance of difference, but integration of diversity.

Tolerance is a kind of PC term for it's okay. I'm okay, you're okay, we're okay, you're good, I'm good, it's all good. That's not the vision of the Mishkan. The vision of the Mishkan is unity is plural, at minimum two. That unity includes diversity, and is made whole by diversity. That we are greater because of the differences, not in spite of them. And that goes for our own Mishkan, our own inner heart, if we can open our heart to the diversity that is within us. All of the little selves, all the little moments. So even when you're forgiving yourself, and that little voice comes up that I know I have every single day, that says, that can't be me, I don't want that to be me, that's not a part of who I am. Whatever we leave out of the Mishkan comes back to bite us in our tochas. If our tent is not open enough to include diversity, and not just include it, but to celebrate it and to integrate it into a larger, a greater whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, that is the message of the creation story.

At the end of the creation story, God looks out at the diverse world, and says, v'yair eletohim et kol asah v'hinei tov me'od. And God looked out into the world and said, it is great. It's not just good, it's goodness, me'od, it's good to the nth degree, in all of its plurality, all of its diversity, in all of its fecundity, in all of its disunified, chaotic unity. So these two principles of building a Mishkan on the outside, of building a Mishkan on the inside, learning that our speech, when it eventually comes out of our mouth, has consequences, that how we speak to others, how we speak to ourselves, creates a world, and that the world that we should be, in some way, hoping to create, is a world where diversity is honored and celebrated.

Of course, when we hear this message, we can't help but think, eh, I don't know, it's so hard. I read a quote from Rabbi David Volpe of L.A. this week. He said, cynicism is a cheap way to seem smart. I don't know if that rings true for you, but it certainly hit me right in the gut. I said, oh, I'm always trying to be smart. Sometimes the thought that things don't seem so simple nowadays breaks my heart.

The old fireplace that warmed our conversations and illumined our lovemaking spews smoke into the already polluted air we breathe. Telephone towers scar the landscape even as they weave their connective web. The very paper I used to pen these words came from the heart of a tree now gone. Along with its gift of life-sustaining oxygen. Everything, it seems, has its price, and so I ask you all, how might we still walk gently on this earth before, before it's too late?