

## **Parashat Trumah: A Divine Invitation for Flexible Thought**

Dear Friends,

At a prestigious forum at the Google headquarters in California, Hebrew University lecturer and best selling author, Dr. Yoval Noah Harari, was asked what, in his opinion, do children of the 21st century need to learn. The crux of his answer was - flexible thought! He explained this using a metaphor: at this time it is more important to learn how to build a tent than a stone house.

“Bingo!” I thought to myself. The Torah had this thought 3,500 years earlier.

In Parashat Trumah, the seventh in the book of Shmot, a week has passed since Moshe ascended into the depth of the mist, up on Mount Sinai, waiting to meet God. When they finally do meet they don't discuss the Ten Commandments; they don't discuss the laws and rules that evolve from the Commandments; they don't even discuss any lofty and deep ideas. Their discussion is surprising: Moshe receives detailed instructions to collect donations from Bnei Yisrael in order to build the Mishkan (the Tabernacle), so that God will live “within them.”

Indeed shocking! Up until now - throughout Bereishit and half of Sh'mot - the theme has been rejection of idols and sculptures that were prevalent among the nations of the area. Unlike these local idols, God, we were told, was everywhere. Suddenly in this week's parasha, He requires a physical sanctuary in which to dwell! And the instructions for building the Mishkan are so detailed that there is almost no room left for personal expression and creativity.

The main characteristic of the Mishkan was its mobility. It was actually a tent - the Tent of Meeting - and it was built to be dismantled and rebuilt at any moment, so as to be taken on the unpredictable journey in the wilderness.

It was a brilliant idea! We need to understand that from the point of view of Moshe and Bnei Yisrael, God “lived” on Mount Sinai. That was His Olympus. That is where Moshe first met Him at the Burning Bush, and where he brought Bnei Yisrael after the Exodus from Egypt, just as God had instructed him to do when he sent him on his life's mission.

Hence, the idea of a Mishkan was fairly revolutionary, it appears. It was not meant to reduce God's presence from “the God of heaven and earth” to a tenant in a narrow tent. On the contrary: it freed Him (in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael) from his permanent residency on a particular mountain so that He could become the portable spiritual presence which would escort Bnei Yisrael on all of their journeys, to this day.

Furthermore, about three hundred years later, King David will look through the window of his castle and feel great shame that he is living in a strong stone structure whereas God is “living” in a tent. He will seek to build a grand temple! His son will get to fulfill that task. Please note, however: God allowed the Temple to be built, but unlike our parasha, God never asked for it, let alone commanded it! The request came from the royal family, and the Temples - both the first and the second - were in fact the source of a great many problems, corruption, and power struggles.

This week’s Haftorah (read each week from the prophets and augmenting the passage read from the Torah) describes the construction of Shlomo’s temple. How appropriate!

Shlomo inherited a flexible, vibrant, and dynamic kingdom from his father - and also the portable Mishkan. At the end of Shlomo’s life it had all become very cumbersome, corrupt, and tainted. The Mishkan had become a temple. I wonder whether the move from a tent to a permanent structure might symbolize the process of ossification which eventually deadens life’s vitality.

As a young man, David overcame the heavy, hulking Goliath. Salah-a-Din’s dynamic army defeated the heavy, armored army of the Crusades. Orde Wingate left a tradition of swift attack for the soldiers of the Haganah, a tradition which later became a main pillar of Tzahal’s military doctrine.

It appears that the discussion between God and Moshe on Mount Sinai is more significant than first appears. The point is not the Mishkan itself, but the flexibility of thought, the mobility, the demand not to become stiff and immobile.

But why are so many details necessary to convey this message? The exact measurements, the list of materials, the mechanisms for putting it all together - all of these are described precisely.

If God had given Moshe more general instructions - something like “build me a Mishkan in which to live, just make sure it’s mobile” - Bnei Yisrael would not be convinced that God dwelled in it and that it was safe to leave the mountain of God. The myriad details and specific requirements provide a sense of seriousness and holiness. They give it legitimacy and authenticity.

I highly recommend listening to Dr. Yoav Noah Harari’s lecture at the Google headquarters. It includes some very interesting observations about the differences between religion and spirituality. Harari does not have much good to say about the God of organized religions (and I chose not to be offended) but he is very complimentary about the God of spirituality, the God of life’s big questions. In his opinion, spiritual intelligence is one of the most important elements needed for living with the challenges of the 21st century. Deep spirituality may prevent the ossification of thought.

I would like to suggest that the Mishkan was, in essence, a spiritual tool which enabled flexible thought and spirituality. The first and second temples (the first made of cedars from Lebanon and the second of Jerusalem stone) are an expression of inflexibility and rigid thinking.

Yoval Noah Harari suggests - rightly, in my opinion - that we should not claim to know what God wants. But the Torah hints that there is something right about flexibility and mobility.

What is true for the 21st century, seems to have been true for our ancestors too: A tent is preferable to a stone house. Indeed, there is nothing new under the sun.

Shabbat Shalom and a happy month of Adar!

Elisha