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SHABBAT TERUMAH

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The newly liberated Israelites in the Book of Exodus; that's where we are in our story tonight. A lot has happened to them already, and a lot more is destined to happen to them before they reach their goal of the Promised Land. They have already experienced the hand of God while still in slavery, and our current generation today has its own Hollywood product with which to picture this time in Egypt. A previous generation had the silent movie **THE TEN COMMANDMENTS**, and others will forever see Charlton Heston as Moses. And now we have DreamWorks' **PRINCE OF EGYPT** with its rendition of the Ten Plagues, as the first-born of the Egyptians are killed and the Hebrews are spared, and it is actually a very powerful image.

We have followed the Israelites in our story as they approached the Sea of Reeds and found themselves trapped between the water on one side and the approaching Egyptian hordes on the other, and the hand of God was seen at work once again. On the other side, Miriam gathered the women and with timbrels thanked God for still another miracle. And at every service, we retell this event again and again with our singing of "Mi Khamokha," and every year, we retell and embellish this story again and again at our Passover tables.

Two weeks ago, the Israelites approached the trembling mountain of Sinai, and amidst smoke and fire and the shaking of the earth and the blowing of the ram's horn, they were given the Ten Commandments. The Israelites were filled with awe and trembling, walking on holy ground in the very presence of God. But soon, later in our story, they will find themselves ready to journey to the Promised Land . . . away from Egypt, away from Sinai, launched into an unknown world fraught with peril and uncertainty. What to do? How to keep the spirit of God alive within this band of travelers searching for the Promise? And so in tonight's Torah portion, with Moses having ascended the mountain to speak to God for forty days and forty nights, God says to Moses: "Let them make me a sanctuary that I might dwell among them."

In this and the next several Torah portions, there is a detailed description of the portable Tabernacle that will accompany the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness. This is a tent enclosure, with specific curtained spaces, and each space is more holy than the next. The most is the Holy of Holies, the curtained-off space which the High Priest entered only once a year on Yom Kippur, and every

year, we retell the story of the purification of the High Priest, first here in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple of King Solomon, before his entry into this space before God as the representative of the entire Israelite people. Inside of this space is only one structure, the ark which would house the Torah scroll and the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments.

We read that this ark was to be a portable structure of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold and with gold rings in its sides in which would be fitted the poles for carrying. And the ark was to be flanked by two golden cherubim. These cherubim would guard the ark as they were said to guard the Garden of Eden from unwanted intruders once Adam and Eve were expelled. "Cherubim" -- not rosy-cheeked angels that the word "cherubs" brings to mind to our imaginations raised on European Christian-inspired art -- but mighty beings having the body of an animal and the head of a human. One should think of the Sphinx rather than Valentine's Day!

Outside of the Holy of Holies was to be another curtained space containing first an acacia-wood table, also portable, with rings and poles. And on this table was to be placed the show-bread, the loaves of bread for the priests. Here was a table to remind the Israelites of their physical natures and their need for the staple of life which is bread. And it is this show-bread that partly explains our tradition of challah for Shabbat.

Additionally, in this space in front of the Holy of Holies, there was to be a seven-branched menorah which was some four-and-a-half feet tall according to Talmudic tradition, and it is a primary symbol of Judaism today. The Temple of Solomon was later to have ten such menorahs, and the Second Temple only one. And it is this single menorah that was taken by the Romans and can be seen represented on the Arch of Titus in Rome to this day. When I saw it, in the Roman ruins, it made a striking impression on me, like, "yes . . . the stories that we have heard and read and studied are true." Here we have the actual evidence, in a carving, made to show the world that Rome had taken the spoils of Israel and had defeated her.

And finally, in this space -- this chamber of the Tabernacle -- in front of the Holy of Holies, was the golden alter upon which incense would be offered every morning and every evening.

So there you have it, the beginning instructions to Moses by God about the first Sanctuary for the Israelites, the separate and sacred space that was clearly meant to foster a special relationship between God and the people. Perhaps it is a human need to search for inspiring environments, a sacred space in which we can gather our thoughts and feel close to God. And it was important for our ancestors because imagine these people, says Rabbi David Morgolis, encamped in their wanderings around a small object. They would protect it and would seem to draw comfort from it, and the object, describing the ark, would be a box with

nothing representational in it.

The box with nothing in it would represent the God of our people, a no-thing God: not a man, not a fish, not a cow, only No Thing. They would say that this God made the universe, bound both physical and moral laws into it and selected the Israelites for a special mission. And we read how, many times, the Israelites wondered how Nothing, No-Thing, could do so much.

But our people wandered in the wilderness and carried this Box of No-Thing with them. Later, when they conquered and settled in their own land, the box moved from place to place among them. And occasionally, it was captured by enemy nations forcing the people to fight to bring it back.

Still later, King Solomon would take on a building project, an elaborate Temple in his capital, for this Box of No-Thing. In fact, the haftarah for tonight's Torah portion is drawn from First Kings, chapter 5, which describes the construction of King Solomon's Temple. And God speaks to King Solomon in much the same words as those of tonight's Torah portion saying: "Concerning this Temple that you have been building, [I tell you this:] I will dwell among the people of Israel and never forsake them."

Slowly over the centuries, something extraordinary came to pass, according to Rabbi Margolis. The complex message encapsulated in this Box of No-thing -- a message about righteous living and loving community -- came to reside increasingly also in the hearts and minds of the people. Even exile and the destruction of the Temple could not erase it from them. So maybe it is in the holy act of building and dedication, as with the Tabernacle and later with the Temple, that the encounter with the ever-present presence of God begins.

Perhaps we can draw parallels as Nehama Leibowitz has done in her Torah commentary where she taught that just as God created a world for us to dwell in, so Moses oversaw the building of a place in which God could dwell. Through the construction of the Tabernacle, we became imitators of God. And if we could imitate the work of God physically, how much the more so should we aspire to imitate God in our treatment of others? "Build me a sanctuary so that I may dwell among them." As we sit in our own rebuilt and remodeled sanctuary, may we, too, feel the ever-present presence of God.

Shabbat Shalom