

Terumah – 5783

We Jews believe in the ONE TRUE God and have always accepted that he is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. In Parshat Beshallach, the omnipotence of our God was proven definitively to our people with the last of the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. There could be no doubt about that. In Parshat Shemot, when Moses encountered HaShem in the Burning Bush and told him to return to Egypt to force HaShem to let our people go, we have proof of HaShem's omniscience. God knew that the Children of Israel were suffering in Egypt. But how does one prove his omnipresence? How does one ever know that G-d is with us? How do we know that HaShem resides amongst us? Surely, one of the lessons of the Holocaust casts doubt on that very notion because, if we always dwelling amongst us, wouldn't he have reacted differently to the rounding up and executing of the Jewish People throughout Europe? This week's parsha and the midrashim that have sought to address the substance of it, seek to help us come to understand.

Before this week's parsha, we read more than a couple of times that, after a particular event, the patriarchs built an altar and addressed their thankfulness to HaShem for his intervention. As the Israelites escaped from Egypt, HaShem showed them the way in a column of Fire and Smoke, but neither of these can prove omnipresence. But now, in Parshat Terumah, HaShem instructs the Israelites to build a Mishkan, a portable temple, where he tells Moses he will reside. But doesn't that fly in the face of the idea that he is omnipresent? Why do we need a specific house for HaShem if he is everywhere?

Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist born at the end of the 19th Century and productive as a theoretician well into the 20th Century, is considered to be one of the foremost thinkers in the area of child psychology. Anyone, like me, who went to what used to be called Teacher's College in the later quarter of the 20th Century, was influenced by his ideas. He propagated the idea that all children go through essentially three stages of cognitive development on their way to adulthood. At the earliest stage of development, everything needs to be reached and touched and played with. WE all of us had drawers in our kitchens with things that our babies could take out of and play with, bang on, touch, throw, etc. This was the sensorimotor stage. Then they respond to the things in the world because they can feel, touch, smell, see them. This he called the preoperational stage. WE all can relate to babies who put things in their mouths, play with toys, have to see, and touch. But after that stage, Piaget argued that they progress to the concrete stage. They name everything and they come to understand the world as a collection of concrete objects. They give names to everything and learn about everything by playing with them, experimenting with them and so forth. Then finally, they can close their eyes and see those same things as abstract. When we, as adults, think about our parents, we see them in our heads, we can remember things that they did for us, and we can intellectualize about our life and the events we have lived through.

Bringing us back to today's parsha though, how do we today and how did the Israelites relate to a G-d that was omnipresent? Remember, we have to go back to those times and remember that the Children of Israel have spent 400 years in slavery and Egypt, where gods were idols and they lived in huge temples that were built as elaborate structures to their glory. The Sphinxes and the Pyramids were thought of as the place where their power was

preserved, and the Egyptians worshipped idols who they bowed down to. Now the Children of Israel, the Israelites are challenged to think not of HaShem as something concrete that they could see and relate to as a physical presence in their lives but as an abstract concept without shape or form. The second commandment specifically forbids graven images or idols. Now what do they do? Are they really ready to go from the concrete stage as Piaget referred to it to the Abstract Stage?

I think that HaShem understood that the Children of Israel could not cognitively make that leap from concrete to abstract, they needed a physical location to be told was the place where HaShem resided. I think we, all of us, have trouble determining how to seek out HaShem? Just where is he or she, to be politically correct? Parshat Terumah concretizes for the Children of Israel, now the People of Israel, the Nation of Israel, where they could go to find HaShem because they were not yet ready to imagine HaShem as everywhere, and available to us at all times.

Truthfully, I think many of us are still at the stage of cognitive development. Research and theory about Judaism in the 21st Century contends that what is most important to all of us is the spirituality that comes over us when we worship together. I have read many papers and articles that argue that what young people today is seek a level of spirituality in the services they attend because they choose to believe in the omniscience of our God, but they don't find him in a synagogue where people are focussed more on decorum and how people are dressed and whether or not people are dressed appropriately. What they seek, what I think we all seek, is the ability to approach the divine and ponder on the mysteries of life and our place in it. That is what the synagogue in the 21st Century has become – The place we go to encounter one another in our common search and encounter HaShem and hopefully find solace in our prayers to him.

When I used to be involved in United Synagogue Youth, when our kids were still involved in some way with Camp Ramah, the Madrichim, the leaders, used to refer to the mekomot at camp where the various eidot used to gather for prayer. I never truly understood where that name came from – referring to places where the various age groups went to daven. But my research for today's Davar Torah led me to understand that the word Makom came to designate the place where we can encounter HaShem. Many of us can relate to places where we believe we have encountered the reality of HaShem in our lives. I sense his presence when I am at the cemetery as well as here in front of the Aron HaKodesh. I might be able to intellectualize and conceive of HaShem in the abstract, but I need the physicality of this sanctuary to constantly remind me of his or her role in my life. I don't think we ever truly lose that need to have a beautiful place to sit in and contemplate the role of the divine in our lives. King David, in his psalms, constantly suggests that he would like to be able to sit in his temple and sense the divine so that he can accept that, at the end of his days, his life was worth something and he could go in peace. We all of us need that sense of higher purpose and meaning and nothing helps us find it better than davening together in our beautiful 100 year old sanctuary. Shabbat Shalom.