

D'var Torah
Parshat Terumah
Congregation Kol Sasson
February 13, 2016

Shabbat Shalom.

As Rabbi Lockshin taught last week, our weekly parshiot have now shifted from the heady days of the narrative found in Bereshit and much of Shemot into the much more challenging weeks detailing all the laws and mitzvot found in the rest of the Torah.

Parshat Terumah is certainly a law-driven text although as I look through the purple chumash, I do see that this is the parsha with more pictures than any other! So, that's certainly something.

The p'shat of this parsha are all of the details involved in building the mishkan and for generations has inspired heated arguments over the significance of when the acacia wood should be overlaid with gold or when it should be overlaid with copper; and what direction you should twist your linen with those in the northern hemisphere thinking it should twist one way and the southern hemisphere thinking it should twist the other.

All joking aside, it's besheirt that I am giving the D'var Torah on Parshat Terumah because what I do want to talk about ties directly in with the building of the mishkan.

A little over a year ago, our then President Brad Sugar invited me to chair the Kol Sasson Mechitza Committee. The mechitza was delivered in August just in time for my son's Bar Mitzvah and with the excitement of that simcha followed almost immediately by the chaggim, we never found an opportunity to draw specific attention to this new sacred element. So, even though they aren't that new anymore, that's my goal for this morning.

But before I speak about our mechitza, I want to put our mechitzas into the context of today's parsha.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book "The Home We Build Together" indirectly addresses the themes of Terumah. I want to thank Josh Feigelson for putting me on to this terrific

text. For Rabbi Sacks, the significance of building the mishkan goes far beyond the need for the newly free Jewish people to build an appropriate venue for HaShem's presence in this world.

We're all generally familiar with the various themes and symbolism of the building of the mishkan. The cherubim, the rimonim, the source of the gold tying back to the plague of darkness, the fact that each tribe just happened to bring the exact same gift as all the others but they all had unique significance; the half shekel contribution from everyone, no more for the rich, no less for the poor. Why all the fuss?

Well, Moshe Rabbeinu was faced with problem not unlike one that we still have today, and one that we ourselves have experienced here at Kol Sasson. How do you turn a group of separate individuals into a community with a collective identity? For Moshe it was transforming the freed Hebrew slaves into am yisrael. For us, it is turning these now 70 odd families into a sacred community called Kol Sasson.

Sacks points out that Moshe's answer, G-d's answer, was to voluntarily create something together. The story of the construction of the mishkan is the story of the creation of a sense of national belonging with the mishkan, and later the Temple, being the symbol of that society.

In his Yom Kippur appeal in 2014, Brad asked us each to contribute to building a mechitza. He challenged us at the time saying that he thought the "physical aesthetic for our sacred space" should "match the spiritual aesthetic when we are with this community." It was time to grow up.

Shower curtains hanging from coat racks were haimish and fine when we were still in our infancy, but they were no longer appropriate for a congregation hoping to attract new members who would join not just because they were compelled the strong philosophical and ideological bond that drove us to form this congregation, but for other equally legitimate reasons like this is where their friends are, they like the davening, they like that we are lay led, or even they like our dues structure. But Brad recognized that while it may be okay not to daven in a formal sanctuary, the aesthetic does matter in those ways that we can control it.

I want to digress for just a moment and acknowledge the irony that we know existed for some of our members that we would make our first significant financial investment as a community on a mechitza. After all, one of the central concepts of Kol Sasson as a Partnership Minyan is to break down the walls between men and women whenever possible. And here we are literally building a new wall.

Of course, the more important concept for Kol Sasson is that we are a halachic community and halacha is very clear that men and women should be separated during prayer.

One more quick digression: It's fascinating to remember that Chicago during the mid-20th century was one of the centers of the Orthodox Shul without a mechitza movement. The zeitgeist was that it would be permissible for an orthodox rabbi to work in a shul without a mechitza because America was moving to the left and if Judaism didn't follow, then it would be left behind. Of course, these came to be known as Traditional congregations and eventually the OU, and here in Chicago Rav Ahron Soleveichic, came down hard on the point that in order to be considered an Orthodox synagogue, you had to have a mechitza.

And so, as “an inclusive, observant community that strives to transform Jewish lives through critical inquiry within the traditional framework of Halacha”, we have a mechitza. As a Partnership Minyan, we are very used to applying that critical inquiry to issues concerning a women's role in prayer and with her **spiritual** needs. But when we start thinking about a mechitza, we are delving into the issue of the community's **physical** needs during prayer as well. Rabbi Daniel Sperber in his book “Women and Men in Communal Prayer,” reminds us that “physical needs and desires are also given significant halachic weight.” He goes on to say that “human dignity- the dignity of the individual- must override *kevod ha-tzibur*, particularly when *kevod ha-tzibur* does not seem to apply as it might have in ancient and medieval times.”

So, all of this brings us to the work of the committee. The committee was made up of Brad Sugar, Debri Klein, Bob Minkus, Sam Glassenberg, Roz Conway, Elise Swatez and me. We had our budget, set by the success of the Yom Kippur appeal, and the charge to get something in place by Rosh HaShanah. We made the immediate

decision to enter into the project with a feeling of abundance and time, however, and not let our work be constrained by these real but somewhat artificial dictates.

When we started to really take up the issue of a mechitza, we worked hard to distance ourselves as best we could from the picture that we all carry of what a mechitza is “supposed” to look like. We also wanted to make sure that we entered into the process with some intentionality that the mechitza should reflect our values as a community.

To do this, we started asking ourselves questions:

- How can we reinterpret what a mechitza might be rather than what a mechitza has been?
- What are the core emotions and values that we trying to express through our mechitza?
- What story are we trying to tell with our mechitza?
- How can we reimagine the mechitza as a traditional, functional, halachic object and bring it back to life?
- What does it look like if we consider a mechitza as a piece of art?

Rav Kook once said that the challenge for Jews is *HaYashan Yit'chadesh, V'haChadesh Yit'kadesh*, to make the old new and the new holy. And that was always our goal. To find a way to create something that was at once traditional and halachic but was also reflective of the values of a progressive, inquiring community. To find a mechitza that was different enough to engage, but was not so edgy that it would distract.

As we talked our way through some of these questions, we started collecting words that we wanted to express through our new mechitza:

Authentic	Open	Light	Can't look solid
Natural	Organic	Living Wall	Halachic
Inspiring	Creative	Modern	Unique
Innovative	Joyous	Tefillah	Art Piece
Fractal	Kavannah	Admired	Not distracting

Then the work began. We balanced our energies between dreaming outside the box and scouring the internet for actual things we liked. We found traditional mechitzas that were gorgeous works of art by obviously very talented designers. We thought about fabric panels that you might find in a hospital or a trade show. We found mechitzas made out of hanging beadwork, and made from balloons.

We compiled a list of artists and designers and contacted them. Finding out what they could do and what they would cost.

It so happened that we learned that a representative from Kibbutz Lavi was in town to design the liturgical furniture for another congregation. Kibbutz Lavi is well known for making liturgical furniture and we had almost ruled them out because we were looking to find something outside the box, and Kibbutz Lavi was, by definition, the box!

We met him here at TBI and spoke with him about what we were thinking and learned that Lavi could meet those two initial conditions imposed by Brad: the price was perfect and if we moved fast, we could have them here by the chaggim.

Lavi initially proposed three different designs to us. It was at this point, that we started getting serious about halacha. We sent the designed to Rabbi Lockshin for his approval. They were all high enough (Reb Moshe Feinstein has ruled that a synagogue mechitza should be 54" high) but there was a question about the size of the gaps. Because lattice work is common, we were confident that some gaps were fine but Rabbi Lockshin did disqualify one of the designs as being a bit too open.

When we were speaking as a committee in the abstract, we had lots of ideas for the symbolism that we wanted to bring into the mechitzas. We spoke about creation, biblical themes, and Israel. So the motif of the Shevat HaMinim, the Seven Species of Israel, was perfect for us.

There are many commentaries about the significance and meaning of the 7 species, far too many to discuss this morning. In these, each separate species

represents a different Jewish value like feeding the hungry, Shabbat, Torah, wisdom, righteousness. You can look them up.

I do want to share just one concept that discusses the shevat minim as collectively having three dimensions (from K. Kedar!):

- 1) Physical- The species connect us to the actual land of Israel, its agriculture, geography, wildlife.
- 2) Symbolic- The species remind us of the importance of the symbolism of eretz yisrael whose history, narrative and story creates and shapes our identity as a Jewish people.
- 3) Religious- The species all intertwine and remind us of the mitzvot, the holiness of the land, and our chosen-ness that unite us all as B'nai Yisrael.

To bring this to an end, physical space, in and of itself alone, is not sacred. It is our obligation to voluntarily create an environment that invites holiness and enhances spirituality. That is what we hoped to achieve with this mechtza.

As a vibrant, evolving community, we must create sacred space that is both portable and fixed; and is infused with values and spirituality. We must keep in mind that Judaism is a communal religion, and while it is true that community can be found anywhere, it is when we are davening together in our holy space, that we can best find spiritual meaning.

Shabbat Shalom.