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Parashat Vayekhel / Pekudei
No Such Thing As 'Too Much'

1.
I'm going to Israel Sunday

The last time I was there, it was Summer of 2019
I started my book in a cafe there owned by my friend Daveed
Ehrlich,
The cafe is an incredible Jerusalem institution where all the authors
have gone to read for over twenty five years
It was the only place I felt I had enough room to begin
He was that kind of person, who made space
An out gay man who raised twins in an alternative family in
Jerusalem,
No small matter in a town that is increasingly traditional, black hat
And to that end
Many ultra orthodox people would hear of him, find him and then
confide in him, they would come out to him and he would help them
He was that kind of person, he made space
And the cafe was holy ground for many
We often joked about how I had the synagogue called the kitchen
and it was both
And how his cafe was sanctified and it was both

It was the summer of 2019
Daveed was still alive then
He had a heart issue see, and he did not go to the hospital because
of covid

And so he died
And not only have I not been to Israel since covid
I have not visited his grave

And see, David loved stories more than anything
That was the whole reason for the cafe and all the many people,
characters in a story,
That was the reason for the writers and his own writing
So I am going to fulfill my obligation
And I am going to go and tell him all the stories of the past few years
And then, after I bought my tickets, I realized it is his *yartzeit* next
week
As if I planned it but God planned it with me

Not only that
Of course I thought I was going to Israel to visit Daveed's grave
But then, even by Israel / Palestine standards, there is a massive shift
happening, the largest demonstrations in history,
Nothing less than a kind of rebirth happening on the streets

I'll have much more to say on that once I have had some time there

Not only that but now that I am going the invitations keep coming
I have more invitations for shabbat than I can possibly fulfill – I will
be having three different meals with three different Israel rabbis and
their families in 24 hours

I have so many questions

As if all that is not enough I found one of my tzitzit is suddenly
broken, it needs to be fixed, and its as if an alarm clock is suddenly
going off

And ya, I could order a new one here but instead I'll visit the French Israeli weavers who made our Torah cover, and our parochet and my tallit so it can be repaired in Jerusalem, the place it came from

And then I realized that in Jerusalem I can hear prayer and piyyutim from all kinds of communities I have little to no access to here, I'm going to visit a different synagogue, representing a different country, every morning –

I started to wonder if I will be able to return there is so much to ask, experience, complete, fulfill

You see

Once we understand ourselves as willing to take on holy errands large and small

Further missions reveal themselves

Sometimes we think we are going on one errand

But we were, in fact, going for another reason

My father has taught me this

We don't always know what God has in mind

But once we set out, once we open the door

Once we offer something of ourselves

We may find that God has something else in mind

2.

A story: When we were building the sanctuary, and everyone was bringing and bringing and Moses says to stop, there's enough

There's a famous line in Torah,

וְהַמְּלָאכָה הַיְתֵה דַיִם לְכָל־הַמְּלָאכָה לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתָהּ

"The[ir] work was enough to get the job done"

וְהוֹתֵר ...¹

and it was... "extra, more than enough, too much."

In other words, it was "sufficient and too much."

And so there's a Hasidic tradition, that it was precisely with that "too much," that "extra"

What we might even call "left over"

That this "too much" must be the ark

You see

The word for holy place, *mishkan*, the holy place where we meet God

It occurs twice in a row in a single verse

אֵלֶּה פְּקוּדֵי הַמִּשְׁכָּן מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדוּת²

Hard to translate / These are the records of the mishkan, the mishkan of the עֵדוּת/ testimony

Twice

Can't be an accident (!)

It must mean that there was not one mishkan / holy place but two (!)

So the rabbis decide the second holy meeting place was indeed the ark³

the most intimate, holiest part of the whole endeavor

and it was made up of that "extra" that Israel had to give

If we're in a mindset of necessity, we just recycle the "too much"

Maybe we are even ashamed of it

¹ Ex. 36:7

² Ex. 38:21

³ Shemot Rabba 51:2

But this "too much," see, this is what drew God closer to us,
This "too much" is what engaged heaven
Because it was *beyond necessity*

The kind of dedication and commitment that stems only from love
The kind that keeps you up all night because you cannot bear to end
the conversation
The kind that makes you stay in the hospital and then again the next
day and the next
The kind that makes you fly across the world just to see a person's
face, just to make sure she's okay

This is what God wanted most.

'The overflow of the innermost heart of Israel.'

Those who remain after the party is over and the guests have gone,
This is what makes us precious to God,
What is left over in the bottom of the heart and so cannot even be
expressed in words.

3.

And yet, there is another reading of this "וְהוֹתֵר"!
What is the "too much?"

Maybe the "too much" is the material that makes up the second
mishkan, the ark, as we said

Or maybe, says the Chiddushei Ha-Rim
Our giving "too much" has a transformational effect on *us*, too.

Maybe it makes us think differently about the world and our place in
it

Maybe giving “too much” makes us reconsider who we are and what we are capable of and what we are doing here

That is, instead of starting with what we owe
Or even what is demanded of us
We start with all we have to offer, and we have so much more than we ever knew

In other words, maybe the Chiddushei ha Rim is saying that by giving in this unrestrained way *we ourselves* can become the second holy dwelling place⁴

Of course!

The inner dwelling place for holiness, the second *mishkan*, is, of course (!) us. When we give like this, *we become mishkanei yisrael, holy places.*

It is so simple and so hard to remember
But once we escape the tyranny of measuring everything
The over extension of the metaphors of the marketplace to measure everything in our lives
Even things that were never meant to be measured
We remember
There is no such thing as extra, there is no more “too much”
And so our giving is not in response to some invasive, depleting demand

Rather we remember we are hoping to give and we have more to give than we ever thought possible
It is our destiny to give

⁴ Chiddushei Ha=Rim, *Sparks Beneath the Surface*, trans. Kushner / Olitzky, p. 115

In fact, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that an apt definition of human happiness was being needed. This is why God asked us to build the *mishkan*. So that we would know we were needed.

And as you know, the part we're reading
The last chapters of the Book of Sh'mot (Exodus) deal with the instructions and implementation of building the *Mishkan*.

And, I'm just saying, no coincidence, there are no complaints, no rebellions, no strife recorded during any one of these chapters of Torah.

You see

When we allow ourselves to give "too much"
to make *ourselves* into *mishkanei yisrael*

It is like a magic trick

It changes all the rules

The "left over" has become the heart of the matter

אָבֶן מְאֻסָּו הַבּוֹנִים הַיְתֵה לְרֵאשׁ פְּנֵה⁵

The stone that was rejected, the thing we didn't want to do

It became the center, key stone of our lives

And with this kind of giving

We realize we are endless and infinite and holy and needed

4.

Sometimes, often actually

I feel I have the best job in the world

I receive such an education in life

⁵ Psalms 118:22

Yesterday, and I got their permission to mention this
Asher and I were honored to help lead the shiva in memory of Craig
Sakowitz's father and Sharon Karlsberg's father in law, Dr. Stanley
Richard Sakowitz, z"l

And there's much I could say
But I just want you to imagine a couch with the family smushed all
together on it, multiple generations, everyone was crying and
embracing
And the love and sweetness in that family was palpable
And just when you thought it could not get any more loving
During one of the stories, at a sad moment, one of the
grandchildren, a teen, went and got on top of everyone else on that
couch, just to be part of that great love

We got a lesson in love in that room
Everyone couldn't help but be moved
The "too much" became the new standard
To say that living room, that couch was a *mishkan* would be an
understatement
Their giving was that palpable
I thought: That's the "too much" the rabbis are talking about.

And the Sfat Emet adds something stunning, a last thing:
He says, that when we gave the "too much"
And by the way he points out, the *act of giving* was first
It was not: think about it or get in the mood or cultivate a perfect
intention

He says, that when we gave the "too much"
Not only did the people begin to understand how generous they
were

Not only did they understand how they needed to be needed

They also found

Their own longing and attachment –

That is,

“The act of offering ...

[Reminded them of the] desire that lay hidden in their hearts”⁶

You see, the giving led them to hidden truth:

They remembered not only all the things they had to give

But all the things they *wanted, their heart's desires*

They remembered their overall longing and attachment for one another and for God

And it was that longing that drew God into the world, finally, again.

I'll just close with this:

My daughter Zella is on a semester abroad in Paris

I asked her to send me pictures of what she saw

So she sent me photos of a few magnificent churches and joked about converting

I thought about what to send her back

I could have sent her photos of some pretty synagogues

We have some, and some are even holy places too

But I think I'll just tell her about the Sakowitz shiva instead

And maybe Daveed's cafe,

The kind of places

Where we give beyond measure, too much, way too much

⁶ Green, Ed. Trans, *The Language of Truth*, p. 137-8, Sfat Emet, 2:227

The kind of places where we are needed beyond measure, too much, way too much

The kind of places where we are allowed to long for each other and for god