

Rabbi Noa Kushner
Terumah 2023
The Most Dangerous of All

So simple and yet, so elusive:
V'asu li mikdash / build me a holy place, and god says, I'll be
there

So simple and so elusive
I know I'm talking precisely, exactly to the very people, to us
Those of us who try to build the holy places
That's what we're doing here, right?
That's what this whole thing is, right?
That the places, okay sometimes metaphorical places,
communities, gatherings, synagogues
(Whatever you want to call what it is we do)
The idea is that god would show up
That, as my father used to say, "sometimes the magic happens"
That's why we're here

Because those moments are so profound they change
everything in their wake
They alter us
And we can then return to the rest of our lives remembering
what it is we want out of life, what it is we want to give through
our lives
That's why we're here, right?

And I personally need to know because I'll admit I want that
magic

I want to remember why I am here

I want to feel the divine garment as it swishes by

Count me in, count us in as people who want those moments
Who need their clarity and yes, the magic

Count me in, count us in as people who are willing to work for
them

Who have, in fact, in no small way, dedicated our lives to
revealing the voice

Who will even chase the opportunity to hear, to catch a word, a
phrase, the sound

V'asu li mikdash / build me a holy place, and god says, I'll be
there

So seemingly simple and yet, so elusive

Because it turns out that our wanting God to show up

To experience that clarity, that holiness in our midst

Knowing that and holding onto it, not getting distracted

Even this wanting, longing,

as counter intuitive as it can be in the circles we travel

It is only a prerequisite

It is barely a key to the outer, outermost gates

It is just the beginning

So we need to find out what to do to get further along

because there's a lot on the table

And we're not satisfied with opening the outermost gates
Wandering in the courtyard

Not to mention

As the people here most certainly know, wanting to hear and
building the place where we might actually hear

These are two very different things

We here are builders, we want to know how to build something

And sometimes, here I'll admit

We not only want to build in order to experience something and
gracefully let it go again

We want to control it, don't we?

I mean I know I do

I'll build but I want to know the holy one will show up with
majesty and glory

And, please, with all the preparations and bills and drama and
details that these meeting places require

(don't need to tell you)

If I could at least know I could summon that energy, that
ineffable quality, the sound of divine heels as they click through
the garden of eden

If I could access those moments with regularity, even a little
predictability

That would really mean a great deal

I could save myself a lot of energy if I knew when God was
showing up

Reschedule certain bar mitzvahs, if you know what I mean

And actually, if I am being completely honest,
I don't want to just access holiness with regularity or even
predictability I want to own it
See, I am afraid to lose it altogether
What if it never returns again? Is that a founder thing?
See, and here we are, you don't have to admit it but I will:
I want to control it, even if I know I can't
I want to bind holiness and keep it safe where I can always have
it

A little golden cage for the divine bird
I want to chant that same prayer where God showed up once
before and have it work again, or teach that text that brought
the sparks, or stand in that room where I felt the rush and know, I
mean know, with certainty God will meet me there
I so want to control it, to keep God in a box for my safekeeping
To keep that feeling
To keep what is the heartbeat of my life within my reach forever

And so now we begin to see why this seemingly innocuous
parasha of proportions and materials is the most dangerous
parasha of all

We are walking through nothing less than a dense forest in this
parasha, so easy to get caught, lost

The dangers are real:

We could first decide that the moments of transcendence are
not worth the pain of losing them and just make pretty
organizations instead

Many people won't notice, let alone complain

We could forget why we started, why god put us here

Or, equally as tragic, we can want those moments so badly that
we deify the wrong things,
Its the oldest story in the world
Actually surprisingly easy to do
Make a god out of anything shiny: status or the amount of
people or buzz or a certain way of doing things or approval
In our misplaced effort to control God, to have God as our own
We can substitute any number of things

See among what was so tragic about the golden calf was that
we actually wanted God
We just were not ready to see the difference between wanting
God and trying to keep God
Wanting God and controlling God

So there are serious consequences, dangers here in the deep
forest of *Terumah*
And yet, here we are
So what do we do?
How do we know what to build?
The whole *parasha* is all clues (!)
but I want to focus on one clue I never noticed before this week:

It has to do with wings
Giant angel wings that are spread out over the ark
But these wings do not surround the ark
They do not wrap or protect it

Nor do they lift fully upwards, as if somehow surrounding or holding the place in the air from which God's voice is said to emerge

And as I looked for the precise word for what these wings are doing, I noticed the same word is used repeatedly, That each time these wings are described torah says:

סְכָכִים בְּכַנְפֵיהֶם עַל־הַכַּפֹּרֶת

סְכָכִים!

As in "to screen"

See, the angels are *screening* the cover of the ark, They are not making a solid shield, impenetrable, Instead these wings comprise something woven

In fact, this is the same word for a screen, the rabbis say in the talmud these wings were like the roof of a sukkah! A place that is marked but also open

And so it seems possible, that the very purpose of these wings is not only to mark the space but also to let more through (!) Which also means, you know this, you do, let more go How do we make the opposite of an idol? By letting more through. How do we make a holy space? Let more go

And so I will end by telling you a last secret
The secret of the secret
After the golden calf
When Moses himself wanted (just like us)
to chase down the presence of God, to have that experience for
safekeeping, for always –
When Moses is frightened and so asks to see God, to see the
divine face once and for all
Just one forever image to have
Something to hold onto when the nights get long

When Moses lapses like this
God responds by hiding Moses in the cleft of the *tzur* / the rock
And famously, covering Moses with God's own hand as God
passes by

But pay attention because the word Torah uses for this covering,
when God covers Moses with God's hand

וּשְׁכַתִּי

Ibn Ezra says this rare word is actually related – it is the same
word as the word for skakh
The purposefully incomplete roof of the sukkah!

In other words, in response to Moses' moment of deep fear and
need to control God, everything

God makes Moses a sukkah out of a rock and God's own hand
With just enough light between the divine fingers

so Moses could experience God passing by,
to catch a glimpse but no more

הַגְּלֵה־נָא וּפְרֹשׁ חֲבִיב עָלַי אֶת־סִכַּת שְׁלוֹמֶךָ

From *yedid nefesh*

Please, my beloved, reveal Yourself by spreading a sukkah of
love and peace over me.

Reveal yourself by covering me – strange

But see, this is not just any cover, we are not supposed to just
see the ceiling of this cover, rather

This is a purposely incomplete cover

A cover that not only lets things in,

it is designed to draw us out, beyond itself

A cover that reveals

A ceiling that is also, somehow, a door

And now we have arrived at the heart of the matter

When we long to meet god,

We must take care to remember

Whatever it is we build

The angel wings are not there to protect nor secure

Like the roof of the sukkah, or the hands of God

They only exist to remind us to let something through