

Torah Thoughts Terumah

5778:

For the next four weeks, the Torah will turn its attention to the details of constructing the mishkan, the Tabernacle in which the priests performed their rituals for God.

Creating space for God is a conundrum: God does not occupy space and thus is not literally 'present' in a place. What do we mean when we say that we build a house for God? The Torah mandates construction of a mishkan; Solomon built the first Temple in Jerusalem and those returning to ancient Judea from Babylonian exile built the second. These structures were built for the same purpose; each is a type of sanctuary devoted to God. But because we do not believe that God has a physical body, building a structure in which to meet or communicate with God seems counterintuitive. What did they think, and what do we think, goes on in a sacred space?

We gain a few insights from the opening words of this week's parshah. The materials used to build the mishkan were donated. No fixed amount was asked of the people. Moses is told to accept gifts "from every person whose heart so moves him." Then, in describing the function of the mishkan, God says "Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them," among *them*, not in *it*. If we read those two verses together, we can say that when human beings feel inspired to donate to the construction of a sanctuary, God will dwell among us.

We feel God's presence by creating space that God cannot, by definition, inhabit. Oddly, and movingly, God dwells among us when we make a home for God, which is to say it is the making of, and the using of, that home that confers God's presence. God lives in the relationships created by erecting, maintaining and making use of sacred space.

Shabbat shalom