

A WORLD FIT FOR G-D'S AND HUMANITY'S PRESENCE

A commentary on *Parashat Terumah*
By Rabbi Mark Goldsmith

In the Torah it took thirty-four verses for G-d to create the entire universe. Just Chapter One of Genesis and three verses of Chapter Two. How long did it take the Israelites to build the rather simpler Mishcan – the Desert Temple? More than 600 verses from *Parashat Terumah*, and the next four *Parashot*.

Why is this? It is because whilst it is not so difficult for G-d to build a home fit for humanity, it is extremely difficult for humanity to make a home fit for G-d.

Parashat Terumah begins with what is needed for any project of transformation that is worthwhile, willing hearts and a willing community. The word “*terumah*” means a willingly given contribution.

At the end of the five *Parashot* that begin with *Parashat Terumah*, in the final verses of the Book of Exodus, the Presence of G-d comes to dwell in the Mishcan that the Israelites have created over those 600 verses.

In our day, we must continue to build a world that is fit for the Presence of G-d. This was not a one-off action. The Mishcan was a metaphor for the world as a whole, as Martin Buber pointed out, the verbs which are used for the building of the Mishcan by humanity are the same as those used to describe G-d's action in creating the world.

A world fit for the Presence of G-d is one where all human beings have the potential to thrive. This is not possible unless all live with the rights enshrined in the values presented in such documents as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. So many of these rights are only possible if those who live around you are willing to grant them to you.

Discrimination will still happen if people practice it. Fair trials will only be possible if they are demanded by people with the will for fairness to be offered to all. Freedom of movement can only happen if those into whose territories one might cross will grant access. We depend on each other's willing hearts, just as G-d depended on ours for the Mishcan to be built.

Another human rights lesson that can be interpreted from *Parashat Terumah* is that of sustainability. Rights which last temporarily and do not have the capacity to be renewed in changed circumstances do not build a world fit for G-d's presence. When the design for the Tabernacle is specified by G-d in the portion of *Parashat Terumah*, Acacia wood is given as the only wood for construction. Midrash *Shemot Rabbah* 35:2 tells us that “G-d set an example for all time, that when a man is about to build his house from a fruit-producing tree, he should be reminded: If, when the supreme King of kings commanded the Mishcan to be erected, His instructions were to use only such trees as are not fruit-bearing, though all things belong to Him, how much more should this be so in your case?” The Acacia tree, a common desert tree which can grow in the most inhospitable circumstances was the right tree for a sustainable project.

Even if it had been available, the most precious wood would not have been right. For human rights to apply to all it needs to be possible for violations to be challengeable in simple, straightforward and easily accessible ways, with lawyers and courts available to all without requiring great wealth or power, like the common desert growing Acacia tree is easy to obtain to harvest.

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