My Heart is Moved

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In Torah, we have movers and shakers who are imperfect (like Moses with his speech impediment), but their access to God and community doesn't always trickle down. Hierarchy is one of those fun things everyone knows about in great detail but rarely says so aloud. In the disability community, it often shows up when we see accommodations that don't actually give everyone access. Some of us are still left out.

While disabled people routinely get excluded, those of us with chemical sensitivity are shut out of pretty much everywhere, including housing. We stay on the fringes because, in the thick of things, the air is unsafe. Ironically, like the Israelites, many of us live in the wilderness, often in tents. We aren't invited to the table (an invitation without accommodation isn't a real invitation).

About a half hour's drive south of me, in San Rafael, California, is a very special place called Ecology House. Built by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1994, it is an eleven-unit apartment complex for low-income people disabled with chemical sensitivity.

When most people think of disabled access in housing, they define it as the ability for a wheelchair user to get in and out. Some people will think about shared housing with an elevator anyone with trouble walking can use, with buttons in braille. Perhaps the fire alarms flash in addition to blare. The imagination of nondisabled people tends to run out at this point.

Ecology House was a really big deal. Before this, the number of low-income apartments accessible to people with chemical sensitivity was zero. Even accessible rentals at any price point were hard to come by. No pesticides, low toxic cleaning and maintenance materials, care with building materials, restrictions on what residents can use in their homes and laundry; these are the backbone of what keeps us safe.

Although many of my friends have resided there over the years, and I've visited countless times, I've never lived there. Knowing it was there meant the world to me though, and still does. It's not perfect and it's not accessible to everyone, but symbolism matters. Allowing eleven people at a time to be part of a community that welcomes them matters.

Torah is filled with exclusion. Only certain people can lead the children of Israel or perform the ritualistic tasks. Don't get me started on exclusion by gender. Disabled people are often explicitly called out and disallowed. While our doers are imperfect (and some are even disabled), their ranks are not drawn from the full range of the people either.

So here we are in Parashat Terumah (Hebrew for "offerings"). The Prophet Moses is on the holy mountain ready to receive the tablets of the Ten Commandments. But first God gives him instructions on how to build the Mishkan, the structure that will hold the tablets and the covenant, and all the objects and finery the chosen priests will use to interact with it.

In the last two parashot before this one, Moses' father-in-law, Yitro, walked him through creating a complex system of judges to make decisions among the people. Then God commanded that only Moses could ascend the mountain to the top. In the parashot after Terumah, God designates Aaron and his male descendants as priests—as the only priests—and puts Bezalel

and Oholiab in charge of the Mishkan craftwork. All these things narrow participation severely.

In-between it all, we find Parashat Terumah. As it begins, we find some very different verses:

> [Adonai] spoke to Moses, saying:
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> Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart is so moved.
>
> And these are the gifts that you shall accept from them: gold, silver, and copper;
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> blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats' hair;
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> tanned ram skins, dolphin skins, and acacia wood;
>
> oil for lighting, spices for the anointing oil and for the aromatic incense;
>
> lapis lazuli and other stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece.
>
> And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.
>
> (Exodus 25:1-8)

Before and after Terumah, most Hebrews are merely supporting players. But now, for a brief moment anyway, we're part of the action. We're doers. I can take a breath and feel clean air rushing in.

Four things stand out for me:

First, is the bit about God dwelling among us. If we can't climb the mountain, if we're not allowed to climb the mountain, or if we no longer live near the mountain, we still have access. We're not tethered to the holy place. We have mobility.

Second, the text says "let them make Me a sanctuary." Though God is clearly giving Moses the blueprints and putting him in charge, it is the people as a whole who are creating this holy space.

Third, is the sheer range of potential gifts. It is nothing more than a list of all the treasures the Hebrews got from their former neighbors, the people they left behind in Egypt. Physical objects any individual Hebrew may or may not now have lying around their tent. All these choices! If the first suggestion doesn't work, here are a dozen more. And variations on those as well.

Every person who wants to give something, will almost certainly have something to give. I might be halfway around the world and more than 3000 years in the future, but even I have some of these treasures in a cabinet somewhere. They aren't available only to the rich or to those able to collect or fabricate an item. If I want to be part of the community that helps create our holiest structure, I can be.

Fourth, is the requirement for entry. Everything else has a bar but, for now, there is none. If my heart is so moved and I have one of the needed items, I'm in. And here it is the motivation that matters far more than the tangible object. Eighteenth century Moroccan Rabbi Hayyim ben Moshe ibn Attar (Or HaChaim) writes that the "gift" described in the text "cannot be used except when the donor has donated it willingly, generously, with all his heart." (Or HaChaim on Exodus 25:2)

Fourteenth century Spanish Rabbi Bachya ben Asher (Rabbeinu Bahya) calls the Mishkan offerings gifts to heaven.

> "When the Israelites would bring such contributions as gold, silver, copper etc., they would be considered as having made simultaneous contributions to the celestial regions…The contributions for the Tabernacle are considered as making a Temple for G'd,…this is the result of the spiritual aspect of the gift, the motivation of generosity…
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> This gift will come with the terrestrial gift. The Shechinah moving to earth and taking up residence inside the Tabernacle will be the result of the spiritual gift. The gift of gold, silver, etc., only provides the location for the Shechinah if we merit its presence amongst us. To sum up: donating materials without the gift representing the right spirit will result in an empty Tabernacle, one in which the presence of G'd is not manifest."
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> (Rabbeinu Bahya, Shemot 25:2)

Who gets the honor of making such a gift? In this case, everyone. Or HaChaim talks about traditional Jewish limits on charitable giving, in part a sliding scale based on a person's wealth, but also leaving out those deemed unable to freely give. Building the Mishkan, however, was different. You could donate even if you were very poor (though he points out that no Hebrew was poor at this time due to the amount of "loot" they all took with them from Egypt). Even if you were an orphan. And even if you were a woman.

It may be a kindness not to require (or accept) charity from ones in need of charity themselves, but it also diminishes. The fabric of a community depends on each person helping where they can, so not being allowed to can feel like rejection. Here at least, the importance of the Mishkan overrode those restrictions.

> "A moral dimension of the verse may have to do with the attachment of the soul to G'd. Such a relationship may be reinforced by means of a tangible gift towards the construction of the Tabernacle. The collective soul of Israel is termed תרומה [contribution]… Accordingly, acceptance of a tangible gift by the Jewish people achieves that G'd's Presence will dwell in Israel."
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> (Or HaChaim on Exodus 25:2)

The barriers go back up in the very next parashah, where God limits access to the inner portions of the Mishkan and suddenly everyone has their hierarchical place again. But that moment of possibility lingers. A place and time where the gates opened wide and we on the sidelines rushed in.

When I can participate in building, I create stairless entries, tactile navigation, and all the rest of the items you might find on a traditional disability accommodation list. But I also create a place where I can breathe. Not only the metaphoric breath that comes with a space where I am included, but literal breathing of air free of the things that slam me to the ground. A sanctuary open to all of us.

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