

Parashat Terumah 2011

As I was driving home with my children the other day listening to the radio, out of the blue Shiah broke the quiet by declaring, “You know Mommy, God isn’t real. I can’t see God, you can’t see God, so I know God is made up.” Without skipping a beat, Jonah responded, “Shiah you can’t say that. Of course God is real, God is everywhere, God is even IN you.” Shiah simply said: “No, God isn’t real.” With Jonah beginning to get agitated and my daughters beginning to that a) I didn’t crash the car with all the tumult and b) no one started screaming or crying, I responded in my best calm voice, “I understand why you say that Shiah. You can’t see God and so it’s hard to understand that God is real; but you can’t see the air you breathe or the wind that’s blowing; you can’t even SEE love, but you know it’s real.” To which Shiah said, echoing the thoughts of millions if not billions of people throughout history, “But I want to SEE God.” I said “So do I,” and then the conversation shifted, as Shiah decided he’d had enough theology for the day and asked if we could put on an episode of Max and Ruby for the rest of the car drive.

Several days have passed since this incident, but I haven’t stopped thinking about it, not because of what Shiah said, but because I feel as though I let the conversation end on an imperfect note. You see, I keep wondering why instead of saying, “So do I wish that I could see God,” I didn’t say what I really believe, “But I do see God all the time. I see God when I see people showing love for each other, when I see doctors helping someone who is sick, when I see one person helping another person that they don’t even know.” That is what I believe, but I didn’t say it. Undoubtedly I will have another chance, since I doubt that that was the last of Shiah’s testing me on the subject.

Nevertheless, I have felt sad about it. Almost always when I am feeling concerned about something, I find a section in that week’s Torah portion to sustain me. This week’s Parashat Terumah is no different.

In the portion we read: “*v’asu li mikdash, v’shachanti b’tocham,*” “They shall make a Sanctuary for Me, so that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8)“

These words are echoed hundreds of years later in the traditional haftarah for this parashah, when God speaks to King Solomon, saying: “This Temple that you build—if you follow My decrees, perform My statutes and observe all My commandments to follow them, then I shall uphold My word with you that I spoke to David your father. I shall dwell among the Children of Israel, and I shall not forsake My people Israel.” (I Kings 6:11).

The importance of these two passages cannot be underestimated. In both instances, God provides specific instructions about the house we are to build for God, but in the end we learn that the house isn’t as important as the people in it. Neither in the Torah nor in Kings does it say that God will dwell in the house—the Tabernacle or Temple. Rather, in both cases it says that God will dwell among the children of Israel.

In other words, God is among us, God can ALWAYS reside among us, but only when and if WE allow God to be with us. That is, just as I said to my son, God is always present and even VISIBLE if we open our eyes and hearts to God. When we give tzedakkah, when we speak kind words, when we help someone, when we daven, when we study Torah. God can be there for all of that.

The problem can become though, where is God when I am suffering? Just this week I spoke with an old friend of mine. She said she was going through a crisis and wanted to know why God was doing this to her. I told her it was her choice to believe that God was doing this to her. Why did she not believe that it was God who was giving her the strength to get through the crisis?

Last week I received the most recent issue of Conservative Judaism magazine. In it there is an article about Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's approach to this most challenging of topics for religious individuals—theodicy, or if God is good, omnipotent, and just, why do the good suffer and the wicked prosper? According to the article, no matter whether you believe God is immanent in our lives, Rabbi Heschel never thought that we can therefore blame God for the problems of the world. To blame God for our problems was like Adam shifting the blame onto someone else.

I have thought a tremendous amount about these ideas since all of the tumult has erupted in the Middle East. While I want to be happy and hopeful about the prospects of freedom and democracy for the peoples of Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen, I am frankly doubtful. I am not so naïve that I can force myself to forget that Hitler was elected democratically in Germany, that the mullahs came to power in Iran after a people's revolution, or that Hamas came to power in Gaza via elections that the US forced Israel to accept.

I want peace to rein, but I am truly worried about what is happening and about the possibility, *has v'halil*, God forbid, that Israel could once again become truly isolated, surrounded by hostile countries who would willingly break the treaties they have signed with her. And yet, as a Jew I believe too that it is my obligation to remain ever hopeful for the future. *Ani ma'amin b'emunah shlaymah b'viat ha-mashiach*. I believe in perfect faith in the coming of the messiah and that the world will indeed someday improve.

Thus I found solace in Rabbi Shlomo Riskin's D'var Torah this week, where he asked the question: How secure should we feel about the future of Israel? He answers his own question by saying that in his view life in Israel is more secure than in the Diaspora and then continues by saying: "I believe in—and insist on proclaiming—the Prayer for the State of Israel every Shabbat and festival. In it we declare that this is the "beginning of the sprouting of our redemption." There are many facts which would buttress this pronouncement: our phoenix-like return to Israel after almost 2,000 years of exile; our miraculous victories on the battlefield; the in-gathering of the exiles from the four corners of the globe; the phenomenal growth of our agriculture and economy

alongside the amazing development of our scientific and hi-tech industries after only six decades of statehood. Moreover, despite the anti-Zionist/anti-Semitic canards, many countries and many Christian leaders stand squarely in our corner—an amazing sea-change after two millennia of persecution. He continues by saying, Indeed, I am thrilled every time I read Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Halevy **Herzog's** response to a delegation of prominent American rabbis who came to the New York airport in an attempt to dissuade the great Torah luminary from returning to Israel after the outbreak of the War of Independence in 1947 (when it looked as if Israel would die before it was born). He assured them that they need not worry; "Our Bible mentions only two destructions [in the portion of Behukotai in Leviticus, and in **Ki Tavo** in Deuteronomy]; this third **Commonwealth** must lead us to the days of the Messiah, and will never be destroyed."

As things get rocky in the Middle East, I pray Rabbi Herzog was part prophet alongside his great Torah knowledge.

Maimonides said 800 years ago that we should take note that when we read in our parashah "They shall make a sanctuary for Me so that I may dwell among them," that it says among them, in order that God may dwell in each and every one of us. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch links the same verse to a phrase sung by the Israelites in the Song of the Red (Reed) Sea: "This is my God, and I shall become like His house." My being and my body must be vehicles to express God's unconditional love, God's compassion, God's loving-kindness and God's Truth. The Lubavitcher Rebbe wrote that just as the skins and walls of the sanctuary housed the presence of the divine, so must our human skin and mortal bodies manifest God's will in our every word and deed. God's sanctuary will endure only as long as we—His people—express his message of compassionate righteousness and moral justice.

Let me repeat that last. I am all for freedom and the will of the people, but I pray that those clamoring for freedom in Egypt right now understand that God desires humanity's freedom not so that we can feel free to murder those different from us, free to wipe out an entire people, as the second in command of the Muslim Brotherhood this week suggested about preparing Egypt for war with Israel, but so that we can all act at all times with compassion, righteousness, justice, and love.