



Torah Reflections on *Parashat Tetzaveh*
Exodus 27:20 - 30:10
February 16, 2008 10th of Adar I, 5768

Then make frames of gold and two chains of pure gold; braid these like corded work, and fasten the corded chains to the frames. You shall make a breastpiece of decision, worked into a design; make it in the style of the ephod: make it of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen. It shall be square and doubled, a span in length and a span in width. Set in it mounted stones, in four rows of stones. The first row shall be a row of carnelian, chrysolite, and emerald; the second row: a turquoise, a sapphire, and an amethyst; the third row: a jacinth, an agate, and a crystal; and the fourth row: a beryl, a lapis lazuli, and a jasper. They shall be framed with gold in their mountings. The stones shall correspond [in number] to the names of the sons of Israel: twelve, corresponding to their names. They shall be engraved like seals, each with its name, for the twelve tribes... (Exodus 28:13-21, JPS translation)

In looking at this week's Torah portion, *Tetzaveh*, it is easy to understand how the saying, "God is in the details", fits well with the themes of the *parashah*. Row after row, detail after detail, precise specifications are measured, outlined, and recorded – like blueprints from a creative Genius who is eager to see the design outlined and executed to its perfection. We are given explicit instructions as to the placement, the order, the materials, the textures, and the colors of the accoutrements meant to create the sanctity of the *mishkan*, a sanctified place where we might go to be in God's presence.

It can be challenging to discern what must lie just beneath all of these details: an intense desire to organize the universe, to make order from chaos. The Conveyer of the Blueprints seems to want everything to be "just right" in order to assure that "everything will be okay". God in this *parashah* is the ultimate architect; God here is the Designer of Space trying to maximize its potential holiness.

Still, the precise attention to detail required to build God's *mishkan* seems to beg the question: why? Why must we follow such immaculate instructions as we strive to create the architecture of this relationship to space? Wouldn't God dwell in our hearts and minds even if we built a space not entirely according to such a particular plan?

I believe that, in this case, the means *are* the end: the instructions *are* the space that we're trying to build. By trying to follow instructions precisely, we honor God and we honor God's desire for order amid so much chaos in the human realm.

When things feel most unruly, most out of control, it is precisely then, in that space, wherein many of us most crave and need specific orders. Here, in this Torah portion, it seems that God intuits this human need for order – or, perhaps, even the semblance of order. These instructions and their precise, painstaking details, are the tools God gives us to utilize when we feel most powerless in our lives. We might feel lonely or afraid, and crave the Presence of Another to calm our fears and reassure us that "everything will be okay". As we experience the chaos inherent in everyday human existence, the "instructions" of *Parashat Tetzaveh* remind us that we do, indeed, have choices. We can always choose the way in which we order our lives in relationship to whatever difficult reality exists currently.

Perhaps the most striking example of this type of precise attention to – or obsession with– detail is when someone we love is sick. We are afraid; we have so many unanswerable questions; we feel lost and out of control. And, so, we want to be sure the pillow is okay, the patient is warm enough, the room looks cheery, the correct medications in their proper amounts are dispensed at the right time and in the right way. This one is taken with food, this one on an empty stomach; this one orally and this one by IV drip. We want to trust people to keep expressed preferences or sore spots or food allergies in mind. We want the nurses at their shift changes at the hospital to understand and respect our routines, feeling every slight shift in the known prescription to be a possible place for loss, for error, for pain, for death.

We often seek or try to create plans and blueprints to help us to feel safe in a world where nothing feels predictable. We try to figure out what to do, how to do it, and with specific instructions about the kind and quality of the materials we will use. Clear instructions that are attentive to our needs can make us feel safe, cared for, protected.

When someone we love is sick, we may want to know all of the possible side effects to the treatments administered, so we might be prepared. We search the internet for alternative therapies, for authoritative information. We often need direction when we feel vulnerable: someone to tell us what to do, how to do it, and which materials to use.

Still, there exists a real dichotomy in the human need for control and the reality of relative human powerlessness in the face of much of our lives. I believe that *Tetzaveh* can be seen as a model for us to utilize when we call out, needing instruction from God (or some other Authority) and, instead, the silence resounds. We, in these circumstances, must instruct ourselves, just as did God for the people in this *parashah*. We must find ways to give ourselves instructions - actions, or, sometimes, reminders to rest - even as we swirl in the chaos of our lives. God gives us tools by which we might sustain or regain our own sense of calm, even in those circumstances where everything feels so desperately out of our own control. We may not be able to change the reality we're in; we may not drastically alter the outcome; but we have the ability to control our own reactions, a small yet precious zone of time or of our own space, our own behaviors, in relationship to whatever difficult reality in which we may find ourselves. We can always search for the (sometimes small) ways to achieve a sense of control over our existences, even when it is clear that we do not (we cannot) have ultimate control. We can always search for the (sometimes small) ways to seek comfort or align ourselves with the Holy, even when overwhelmed by the direction of our lives.

This is the real reason why God is in the details. We are given ways to find divinity inside ourselves, ways to create places or even moments of sacred focus and precious sanctuary even in times of deep uncertainty and wilderness wanderings. In the Torah, God teaches us by example how to "instruct" ourselves as we navigate the challenges of our lives.

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