

Terumah
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GIFTS

This past Tuesday evening was an incredible night. As Melissa and I sat on the couch holding little Zachie in our arms, we watched the election returns come in from states across the nation. We looked at our little boy and wondered what this election might mean for him. We wondered what kind of world we would give him with our votes in this election. We wondered who would be best to give Zach and his generation the strongest possible future.

And then we realized a profound truth. Though the outcome of the election is far from certain, and though the remaining candidates offer vastly different visions for the future, that night of primary elections was by itself giving America an incredible gift.

Forget for a moment the candidate whom you supported. Think instead of just the simple biographies of the candidates. One is a woman who has accomplished much already. One is an African American who seems to have created not just a campaign, but a movement. One is a senior citizen who has served his country with honor. One is a Mormon, a proud member of a minority faith in our country. Imagine! This mix of individuals will seem normal, even base-line, for the next generation.

When I was growing up, I sometimes thought I wanted to be the president of the United States some day. But I knew that being a Jew might make that dream a challenge. As I grew and learned, different passions took hold, and I found my calling in our sacred tradition. And before I finished rabbinical school, a Jew had indeed found a place on a national ticket.

In just eight short years, look at what our nation has produced. Tonight, in 2008, we have a field of candidates who represent no one majority in society. All, in their own way, represent a group too often pushed down and ignored. We Americans, by our choices so far this election year, are giving our children a beautiful and wondrous gift.

Our Torah Portion this evening, Terumah, speaks of gifts and what can come from the act of giving. The Israelites are told to bring gifts for the building of the Tabernacle. Each whose heart was moved brought gifts—fine textiles and materials that would become the elements necessary for constructing the sacred vessel containing the Tablets of the commandments. And then, just after the statements on gifts comes a challenging verse: V'asu li Mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham. Build for me a sanctuary that I may dwell among you.

Our gifts carry so much power. When we give from our hearts and our souls, we can convey so much to the receiver of the gift. We can do more than create a hallmark moment. We can touch the *neshama*, the soul, of another person, and we can make the future brighter with the simple act of giving.

Our Parasha notes that the giving of materials will allow for the building of a sanctuary of sorts, a place for God to reside in our midst. This cause-effect scenario has produced many questions over the centuries. Do we really believe that we need to have a sanctuary to have God's presence close by? Do we believe that God will only dwell with us when we give something first? Are God's actions reliant upon our actions—that is, must we act first to give, and only then will God act and dwell in our midst? While these questions continue to confound, I believe that a truth emerges. When we give, we build sanctuaries for ourselves and for the receivers of the gifts.

My favorite book of the great rabbi and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel is a deceptively short volume. Entitled simply, *The Sabbath*, Heschel writes in beautiful language about the ability of Shabbat to transform our lives. Heschel writes that Shabbat, if we grant it the ability, can become an island in time, a respite from the hectic craziness

of our everyday lives. In a sense, Heschel suggests that we need to give ourselves a gift each week: the gift of Shabbat. And when we give that gift of Shabbat, we receive a sanctuary in time, a 24 hour period to relax, reflect, and replenish our souls.

Heschel's life was not easy. Born in Germany, he was a bright young man and a promising student when the dark clouds of war descended upon Europe. He was among a small group of students who were saved by the Hebrew Union College. In a sense, HUC found the best and brightest, and gave them the ultimate gift: the gift of survival. Heschel came to America, settled in Cincinnati, and learned English.

As time went by, he found that the Conservative movement better fit his theological beliefs, and he moved to New York to join the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Even with the change, he never lost the Reform perspective of Social Justice as an integral part of Judaism. He marched with Martin Luther King, and something tells me he would smile and delight in the mix of candidates currently seeking the presidency in America.

Heschel grasped, through his own experiences, the deep power of giving and receiving. In his volume on Shabbat, he offers us the image of Shabbat as the ultimate gift, carrying with it the ultimate reward of God's nearness. Heschel lived the reality of sanctuary coming in the form of a gift, and in his words and work, he tried to show others the power that can come, and the sanctuary that can be created, by gifts.

Gifts can also create sanctuaries of learning. Just as we can give ourselves the gift of time, we can also give ourselves the gift of intellectual curiosity. Each one of us sitting here in this sanctuary has the ability to learn new things, to explore new parts of the world, new parts of ourselves, new parts of our local library. Each one of us, if we so choose, can decide to begin to explore that which seems foreign. And when we do, we will give ourselves a sanctuary, a place of holiness where understanding and holiness reside together.

So easily, after a long day of work, we can come home, kick off our shoes, and eat dinner on the couch while watching American Idol. But for what purpose? Yes, at the end of a long day we all like to relax and unwind. But think of the lessons the rest of the family will learn as they watch us.

Instead of dinner at the couch, try dinner at the table, surrounded by conversation. Instead of American Idol, how about something uplifting or life-affirming? Our televisions, with hundreds of stations, can bring in to our homes good speech or bad speech, good messages or bad messages. We can use our unwinding time at home to delve into new things, to read, listen, watch, enjoy subjects waiting to be explored.

When we make the choice to give ourselves the treat of something good on television, something good in a book or magazine or on a DVD, we help to make our homes sanctuaries, dwelling places for not just our loved ones, but for God, too.

Finally, gifts can create the sanctuaries of love we all need in life. When we give something to someone, we engage in an act of love. A true gift does not even need a card! The gift itself says, “I care about you, I want you to feel loved and appreciated, I want to give some of myself to you.” The recipient of such a gift can feel the sanctity and security of God, and by the simple act of giving, we create a sanctuary. This notion of gifts as a means for creating sanctuaries of love resonates in many faiths.

Many years ago, Mario Cuomo, then the governor of New York, gave the graduation address at Iona College in New Rochelle. In it, Cuomo asked if the parents of the graduates were the ones to now teach what the instructors had tried to teach.

...That the philosophers were right. That Saint Francis, Buddha, Mohamad, Maimonides—all spoke the truth when they said the way to serve yourself is to serve others; and that Aristotle was right, before them, when he said the only way to assure yourself happiness is to learn to give happiness.

Cuomo understood the power of giving to another person. He saw that by giving one can create a place where God dwells with us in a loving embrace. For each of us here tonight, and in fact, for each of us who walks the earth, the act of giving love creates holiness no matter how we understand that holiness.

Friends, gifts of time, of learning, and of love provide the giver and the receiver with much more than any other kind of gift. When we give of our time, our ability to help another learn and our love, we help create new sanctuaries for the Divine. In those gifts, we give not just a temporal gift, but as well the larger gift of God's presence. Each of us has the power to build a sanctuary for ourselves or for another person. And each of us has the ability to help another find that place where God dwells.

Let us become even more, a community of givers. And let our gifts create new holiness and new hopes and new dreams for not just ourselves and our generation, but for the generations yet to come.