



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Terumah 5772

By Liel Leibovitz
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It's hard to read *Parshat Terumah* and not think of the economic catastrophe of recent years. That crisis, after all, was brought about largely due to unhealthy mortgage practices that allowed individuals without much capital to buy houses well beyond their means. And here, as the story begins, are the Israelites, acting like the most irresponsible of homeowners: Despite being a nomadic desert tribe, they squander their fortunes on erecting a lavish mansion—the *Mishkan*.

In their defense, the mansion's intended resident is God, who asks them to make the sacrifice. "Speak to the children of Israel," God commands Moses, "and have them take for me an offering; from every person whose heart inspires him to generosity, you shall take my offering... you shall take from them: gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson wool; linen and goat hair."¹ The list goes on.

You may expect that God would take into consideration the particular transitory nature of the nation, and order a more modest sanctuary. You may also wax metaphysical and ask why God, the ultimate disembodied being, needs a sanctuary to begin with. After all, God is everywhere in the world. True, the *Mishkan* is portable, but it is still a concrete structure with walls and a roof, tangible and real. Herein lies the profound beauty of *Parshat Terumah*: it's a subtle but powerful meditation on the meaning of home, an argument for keeping a roof over everyone's head, from the Creator to every last creation.

As the real estate bubble teaches us only too well, many of us moderns have come to think of a home as the ultimate commodity, the biggest and shiniest object we'll ever own. Reality shows like *House Hunters* consist of seductive shots of porches and bedrooms and yards, as if it's the square footage alone that makes a house into a home.

God knows better—insisting on a costly crib not to flaunt wealth or might, but to allow the Israelites to make the painful sacrifice that is necessary if they are ever to see the sanctuary as something sacred and timeless, as a real spiritual home. It's the opposite of a no-money-down mortgage: God demands payment in full and in advance, knowing that sacrificing for the *Mishkan* will give the Israelites a feeling of deep ownership.

But that's not all. In building the sanctuary, God teaches the Israelites a valuable lesson: For a collection of ancient tribespeople becoming progressively accustomed to life on the move, insisting on one particular, fixed structure as holy sends a powerful message: housing—whether Divine or human—should never be taken lightly. Home is imbued with holiness. A home is a basic human right.

Unfortunately, it's a message everywhere ignored today. That's the case in America, where predatory lenders still habitually move to foreclose despite repeated studies that show significant all-around economic benefits to working with defaulting homeowners, restructuring debts and keeping people in their homes.

¹ Exodus 25:2-4.

And, for a host of divergent reasons, people in many other parts of the world are similarly deprived of shelter. In Haiti, for example, approximately 595,000 people, robbed of their homes by the 2010 earthquake, still live in the 900 or so internally displaced persons camps surrounding Port-au-Prince. When President Michel Martelly took office last spring, he vowed to shut down the camps within six months and relocate their inhabitants to permanent housing projects, starting by relocating families from six camps to 16 neighborhoods around Port-au-Prince in his first 100 days. So far, three of the camps have been mostly closed. Unfortunately, residents of one of the camps were forcibly evicted, and others had nowhere to go and no access to water and sanitation services. A recent University of San Francisco survey found that 34 percent of displaced persons in Haiti reported “leaving their camps because they were forced out by evictions.”² Today, many Haitians still live in camps. A comprehensive national housing strategy does not exist.

Like the Israelites, the Haitians are refugees vying for a permanent home. Forced evictions and lack of adequate planning make their dream a distant reality. As we continue to think about our moral obligation to provide adequate housing for all, let us learn from *Parshat Terumah* that there’s no place like home and no end to the sacrifices we ought to make so that all of humanity can enjoy its sacredness.



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² Nicole Phillips, Kathleen Bergin, Jennifer Goldsmith and Laura Carr, “Enforcing Remedies from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights: Forced Evictions and Post-Earthquake Haiti.” <http://www.wcl.american.edu/hrbrief/19/1phillips.pdf?rd=1>

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