Building a Sanctuary Within: Thoughts for Parashat Terumah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Terumah

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Some years ago, my wife and I attended a school performance of one of our grandchildren. The class put on a production that included songs and narration, costumes and dances. While we wanted to enjoy the program and cheer for all the children, we had to deal with a number of parents who had ideas of their own.

Quite a few parents/grandparents brought their i-pads and mobile phones and were busily making videos of their children on stage. These photographers stood up, moved around, and generally made it difficult for members of the audience—including us—to enjoy the program. Even when asked to sit down, a number of the parents kept right on with their photography.

Why were they making these video recordings? To save the memory of the event. And yet, they weren't experiencing the event itself! They were entirely devoted to aiming their cameras—probably on their own children. They were videoing something that was supposed to be a memory; but they didn't have a memory of the production itself, only a video that was supposed to preserve a memory.

This seemed to be a parable of modern life. Instead of experiencing the reality of the moment, people experience life mediated through cameras, cell phones, i-pads and other technology. People are so busy trying to record and remember everything, that they miss the actual thing they're supposed to be trying to remember. Life isn't lived directly, but only through artificial lenses that focus on bits and pieces of experience, not on the whole picture.

The loss of real human experience and communication goes far beyond the technological revolution. Even when people are supposed to be conversing, they often seem to be talking at rather than speaking with. There are people who seem incapable of actually listening; they are so filled with themselves that they

talk, talk, and talk some more. They think they are validated only if they have an audience to impress or entertain. They seem to be afraid of life, afraid of silence, afraid of authentic human interaction. They live as play-actors, not as real human beings. They are victims of, and manifestations of, a society that becomes increasingly de-humanized and de-personalized.

This week's Torah portion begins with God instructing Moses to call on the Israelites "that they bring Me an offering" for the sake of building a Mishkan, a sanctuary. God, of course, is Master of the Universe. He hardly is in need of any offerings of gold and silver. The instructions continue by saying that gifts should be received from each person whose heart inclines to donate. What God apparently is seeking is not material gifts, but gifts of the human spirit. He is looking for people with pure hearts, filled with generosity and honest religious devotion. The Mishkan, in fact, is a sanctuary that reflects human spiritual aspirations, not merely a physical place of worship. And so God states: "And they shall make Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell in them," i.e. in the hearts and souls of the people.

What is true for the building of a Mishkan is also true for the building of authentic lives. What is demanded is a generous and compassionate heart, an inner being filled with love of God, an authentic humaneness. The goal is not the external trappings of life, but the interior thoughts and emotions that make one's life ring true.

We live in a world where images often replace realities, where vicarious experience is valued more than experience itself, where people are so busy capturing memories that they miss the fullness of genuine life.

We are called upon to build a sanctuary to the Lord…within ourselves, so that He may dwell within us. We are called upon to live life in its fullness directly and thoughtfully.

And please, you standing up in the front row with your i-pod, please sit down and enjoy the program; and let the rest of us enjoy it too. There's a professional photographer in the back who can provide you with all the pictures you need after the program is over.

Angel for Shabbat