

## D'var Torah Feb. 4 2022, Terumah

In this week's Torah portion, Terumah, Exodus 25:1-27:19, God instructs the Israelites to build a holy dwelling place for the divine presence here on earth. They are to build this sanctuary from their "*Terumot*" - voluntary gifts that each Israelite brings. God requests a tremendous list of items - gold, silver, and copper; yarn in blue, purple, & crimson; fine linen; goat hair; ram and dolphin skins; acacia wood; oil, spices, and incense, and precious stones.

God expects a lot from the Israelites. But, importantly, God doesn't expect any one person to bring everything, nor for all the different people to bring the same thing. Rather, the only way to create God's dwelling place among the people is for each person to bring their own individualized gifts. There are roles for metalsmiths, hunters, tanners, spinners, weavers, carpenters, foragers, and shepherds. When each of them brings their own specific skills, they are able to create something truly holy. This teaches us that building holiness in our own communities requires us to create space to allow everyone to bring their diverse gifts, whether they are skills, or experiences and perspectives.

Earlier this week, the panelists of The View were discussing a Tennessee school district's decision to ban the graphic novel *Maus*, which is an important educational work for teaching about the horrors of the Holocaust. The panelists were universally concerned about the way that this school seemed to want to direct their students away from learning about the Holocaust, despite claiming that their problem with the book is its depiction of nudity. Joy Behar said, "I'm not sure that they don't use the naked part as kind of a canard to throw you off from the fact that they don't like history that makes white people look bad." Whoopi Goldberg responded, "This is white people doing it to white people." Later, in the segment, she dug in more, claiming the Holocaust was not about race at all. Goldberg received immediate backlash, and within the day issued the following apology:

On today's show, I said the Holocaust 'is not about race, but about man's inhumanity to man.' I should have said it is about both. As Jonathan Greenblatt from the Anti-Defamation League shared, "The Holocaust was about the Nazi's systematic annihilation of the Jewish people - who they deemed to be an inferior race." I stand corrected.

The Jewish people around the world have always had my support and that will never waiver. I'm sorry for the hurt I have caused. Written with my sincerest apologies, Whoopi Goldberg.

Goldberg did not minimize the trauma of the Holocaust or defend antisemitism. She issued a sincere apology, showing that she had already learned how to do better in the future. And yet she was still suspended from The View for two weeks.

What if, instead of punishing Goldberg, we were able to see instead that she is coming from a different perspective? There are certainly problems with what she said - claiming across the board that Jews are white people contributes to the erasure of Jews of Color. Even though the majority of victims of the Holocaust were Ashkenazi Jews, White Jews, there were deportations and labor camps in North Africa. And the Nazis did view their hatred of Jews in an extremely racialized way. But the thing is, Whoopi Goldberg's experience of race as a Black woman in America is vastly different from that of a light-skinned Jewish person here. Many of us benefit from white privilege in a way that she will never have access to, no matter how wealthy or influential she is. And Jewish experiences of race and ethnicity are so complicated that many people who live those experiences struggle to define them.

Yair Rosenberg writes:

Goldberg is not an anti-Semite, but she was confused - and understandably so. In my experience, mistakes like hers often happen because well-meaning people have trouble fitting Jews into their usual boxes. They don't know how to define Jews, and so they resort to their own frames of reference, like "race" or "religion," and project them onto the Jewish experience. But Jewish identity doesn't conform to Western categories, despite centuries of attempts to shoehorn it in. This makes sense, because Judaism predates Western categories. It's not quite a religion, because one can be Jewish regardless of observance or specific belief... But it's also not quite a race, because people can convert in! It's not merely a culture or an ethnicity, because that leaves out all the religious components. And it's not simply a nationality, because although Jews do have a homeland and many identify as part of a nation, others do not.

Instead, Judaism is an amalgam of all these things - more like a family (into which one can be adopted) than a sectarian Western faith tradition- and so there's no great way to classify it in English. A lot of confusion results from attempts to reduce this complexity to something more palatable for contemporary conceptions.

In my training in Israel Education through the iCenter, we talked a lot about the concept of "multiple narratives." There are true things that happen, this is not the same thing as "alternative facts," but the ways that people experience them are not the same. It is true that the State of Israel was declared in 1948, and there was a war from which the first modern Jewish State emerged. Many Jewish people experienced it as a triumph; many Palestinian people experienced it as a tragedy. In a more lighthearted example, a child might experience a snow day as great fun and excitement, while their parents might experience it as a stressor when they have to shovel and arrange childcare. While the facts are fixed, the ways we experience them are not. I really think that Goldberg's perspective was not so much a mistake as a reflection of living in a different narrative. Those of us who are not black women will never get to experience the world the way she does, and might not fully understand her, just as she does not understand the experience of living in the world as a Jew. That doesn't mean that she was necessarily wrong.

Can we hold the idea of multiple narratives as a gift, as something that people generously donate of themselves when they reveal that they experience the world differently from one another? Can we acknowledge that different people experience race and ethnicity in different ways? That there are multiple ways of viewing Israel and Palestine? Or even, that you are all here at this same service tonight, praying together and hearing the same words, but that all of you will have different feelings about it?

In the Torah portion, after requesting that laundry list of items, God says "*V'asu li mikdash, v'shachanti b'tocham*" - They will build a sanctuary so that I will dwell among them. God doesn't need a dwelling place to be amongst gold and stones. God wants to be among the people. The way that the people can create the space for God is by bringing their unique gifts.

This Shabbat, may we remember that it is a gift that each of us has a different way of experiencing the world and a different perspective. Let us create space for holiness by leaving space for other people's perspectives. Let us learn to listen before discrediting. Our community is stronger because we all bring different gifts. Let that bring us together rather than divide us. Shabbat Shalom.