

USING THE TOOLS WE'VE BEEN GIVEN

HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE WHAT IS DEMANDED OF US?

TORAH BLESSING

VOICES FROM OUR TRADITION:

In her sermon, Rabbi Kolin refers to the following *midrash*:

Rabbi Joshua of Sichnin said, in the name of Rabbi Levi:

When God said, “Make Me a Mishkan,” should He not have erected four pegs and stretched the Mishkan-tent over them? But it teaches you that God showed Moses up above a red fire, a green fire, a black fire, a white fire, and told him, “Make it according to the pattern that you are being shown on the mountain.” (Num. 25:40). Rabbi Berechya in the name of Rabbi Batzla said: This is like a king who had a splendid garment made of jewels. He said to his personal friend, ‘Make me one just like it!’ He answered, ‘My lord the king, can I make one like it?’ The king replied, ‘I remain in my glory, but you have your materials.’ Similarly, Moses said to God, ‘My God, can I make anything like these fires?! God replied [by listing the materials for making the mishkan], ‘Blue purple and crimson yarns, fine linen . . . ‘ God said ‘If you make what is above below, I shall leave my palace above and descend and condense My Presence among them below.’”

– Bamidbar Rabbah 12:10, trans. Aviva Zornberg

Bible scholar Aviva Zornberg writes:

Whatever the particular symbolic significances of the four colors may be, it is remarkable that what God has done, effectively, is to complicate Moses’ task. Showing him a model has not helped him to comprehend the project better. On the contrary, it makes him recoil.

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In what sense, one may ask, is this structure of “cheap materials” *like* the fiery original? What is the condition for God’s descent, for the *tzimtzum*, the condensation of His presence? To offer another analogy, is this not like an attempt to translate Shakespeare into pidgin English? One understands Moses’ recoil. Why has God complicated matters by showing the vision of the fires? And what would it mean to make a copy of those fires in wools and woods?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) In the midrash, why does God offer a “blueprint” that cannot be replicated?
- (b) How are the Israelites to know when their effort is close enough to what God desires?
- (c) In the midrash, having an unattainable goal is both inspiring and demoralizing. How do you react to goals that appear out of reach? Does it matter what type of goal it is?
- (d) Often, we see political candidates who promote visions of dramatic change for this country, which may not be achievable in the foreseeable future. What are the pros and cons to “dreaming big” like this? Is it irresponsible? Or necessary to spur us to aspire to more?

DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

Rabbi Kolin writes:

So why do the rabbis add this dialogue between a frustrated Moses and flexible God? I think to some extent because this world is our imperfect building project. We’ve got the blueprints, we have the basic idea of what we’re supposed to do. But more often than not, the picture on the box is a disparate image from both what we feel capable of building and the materials we have with which to build. Consider the project you are working on right now – your job, your family, your marriage, your romantic relationship, your friendships, your sense of self, your vision for your future, your work to make our world a more just place.

It can all feel out of reach: the perfect marriage, the perfect job, the *perfected* world. We gaze at a mountain of red fire, green fire, black fire, and white fire compared to what we’ve got and think: this doesn’t look like I thought it would. So the rabbis of the midrash come to remind us that we can only do the best we can with what we’ve got.

And maybe that seems like a copout, something we tell kids to make them feel better – that to make an effort is good enough. I mean - the bookcases are only good if they can hold all the books, if they can do their job. The *mishkan* comes with a promise that if we build it well, God will dwell among us. So is this a rabbinic copout or is it real? Can we build something worthy with what we’ve got, with only our capacity, even if it does not look like we thought it would?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How would you answer Rabbi Kolin’s question? Is this vision of a “good enough” *mishkan* a copout? Or is there something to the idea that it is the thought that counts? Does it matter what kind of “project” you are talking about? How do we know when what we are doing is good enough for God to dwell among us?

- (b) Is it necessary or helpful to picture a “world redeemed” if we know we cannot attain it? What would your vision of a redeemed world look like?
- (c) Thinking back to the project you envisioned during the opening exercise, what would a “doable” or “good enough” version of that project look like? Could you be satisfied with that lesser achievement?