

Parsha Terumah | February 29, 2020

Institution: The Symphony of Society

A quotation that has great meaning for me comes from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a great German writer and statesman. He once said: *Music is liquid architecture; architecture is frozen music.* Goethe suggested that in the same way that great music can touch our souls and transform us, great architecture can shape us, our world view and our experience. I think of places that I have visited in my life, both ancient and modern, that have taken my breath away, and moved me to my core. I am sure that all of us have experienced that timeless moment when you feel as though a space has become a symphony of beauty and meaning.

This Shabbat, the Torah embarks on the greatest building project in history: the creation of a place for God's presence to dwell. In the same way that the opening chapters of Genesis capture God creating a home for humankind, Parshat Terumah offers a vision of the *Mishkan*, a structure to engage with God:

ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם :

Let them make me a Sanctuary and I will dwell among them (Exodus 25:5)

In this structure, there is a wondrous interplay with form, function, and ritual. It is as Goethe suggested; the frozen music of the Jewish people. The *Mishkan* is the spiritual symphony of the Jewish people: a place of structure, of grandeur and intimacy.

Coming directly after the Sinai experience, the *Mishkan* represents a place of revelation. The Ark of the Covenant features Cherubim on the top whose mouths carry the continuation of the revelation that Moses heard at Sinai. But the *Mishkan* has one feature that Mount Sinai lacks: its portability. The Tabernacle is a movable sanctuary, a place where we can meet God wherever our lives take us. For one period of time, that place was located in Shiloh, and then King Solomon built a permanent place: the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Temple in the Jerusalem.

In our Torah portion, every Jew had the obligation to donate a half shekel for the construction of the Tabernacle. This custom continued throughout the time of Temple to ensure the maintenance of this holy place. But when the Temple was destroyed, Jews worked to make a different contribution. Instead of a half shekel, they did their parts to create different structures to take its place. While not architecturally significant, these places were no less beautiful or melodic. They, too, embodied the music of the Jewish experience.

What replaced the Temple were different structures, not physical in form. Our institutions housed us with invisible walls. They were just as portable as the *Mishkan*, and equally significant for the preservation of Jewish life.

Shabbat became a refuge for the Jew, an opportunity to do as Shlomo Alkabetz suggested in the prayer *Lecha Dodi*: shake off the dust of wandering and remember who we are and what we represent. The Sabbath became an invisible *Mishkan*, or, as Heschel put it, a sanctuary in time.

There is the Jewish home: a place where Jewish values could be shared, where holidays could be celebrated anywhere in the world, where world views could be shaped. It became the *Mikdash Me'at*, the miniature sanctuary.

There are synagogues which have evolved over the years and have provided a place of community, a spiritual center in a world that was often topsy-turvy, but there is the ark, the new eternal light, both symbols taken from the *Mishkan*, that remind us that the intimacy of God's presence is still with us wherever we wander.

Schools and yeshivas became places where Jews could familiarize themselves with Jewish texts, the *Masoret*, and the true sustaining power of Torah and peoplehood.

These institutions took the place of the Temple and accompanied us in our wanderings, enriched us and sustained us.

The power of institutions has long been understood as the invisible infrastructure of our community. That which allows the great symphony of society to be heard. Like the Temple of old, each of us has a half shekel to contribute to our institutions that shape our society, and in turn, those institutions shape us.

In short, our institutions allow us to fill roles, occupy places, and play parts defined by larger wholes. They help us understand our obligations and responsibilities, our privileges and benefits, our purposes and connections.

This is not a Jewish idea but one that has served as the underpinning of great nations. The vital power of institutions came to the West through the Greeks and their understanding of the ancient Polis.

From the earliest times, people understood that strong societies are those that maintain strong institutions.

And when those institutions are under attack?

Well, that is the question of our age!

We are living at a time when institutions across the board are being attacked, critiqued, weakened, and, in many cases, dismantled, from the Boy Scouts to the Supreme Court. Now, some of the seeds of this anti-institutional revolution coming from the right and from the left can be understood as a carryover from the 60s. However, much of the fault can be attributed to failure of leadership in a number of these institutions.

In the case of the Boy Scouts, their request for bankruptcy protection came in the wake of hundreds of sexual abuse lawsuits. Another example is the Catholic Church, which has suffered its own failure of leadership.

But in other cases, attacks on institutions stem from other sources, often with the goal of power and political gain. In our age, it is harder to think of institutions that are not under attack than those that are.

Yuval Levin is a political analyst, thinker and founding editor of the Nation Review, and has done a great deal of thinking about the importance of institutions and the danger of this moment. In a new book entitled [A Time to Build](#), Levin offers an important perspective on the importance of our institutions in American life and the danger of dismantling them without having something with which to replace them.

The word *formative* is at the heart of Levin's thinking. Every institution is formative in some way and shapes the souls of those who are a part of it, whether they know it or not. We do not think about this as much as we should, Levin argues, and much of the failure of our institutions arises out of that prior failure—the failure of institutions to remember what they are there for and be the particularly shaped entities they were made to be.

This, then, is the music of an engaged society, not frozen and not silent, but a symphony based upon the harmony of each person playing their own role and together creating space for the larger whole.

But what happens when we lose respect for our institutions; question their honesty, their integrity, or their purpose?

Here, Levin uses the word *performative*—the notion that, say, instead of going to college to be formed by the values of that institution, one instead goes to exploit the opportunities that a college affords to shine and show off the originality and brilliance of one's already formed self. The movement from the formative to the performative is a move from “molds to platforms,” from institutions as shapers of souls to institutions as performance halls and

gratifiers of egos, as soapboxes for our own individual ascent. We regard the institutions through which we move not as places for our affections and our loyalties but as places to pause along the road to something else, whose immediate benefit to us is always the chief consideration in our dealings with it.

If we could hear the symphony of our time, I suspect it would be one of jarring dissonance.

We are living in the age of iconoclasts, where institutions as vital to America as the Temple was to Israel are being cast aside without anything to replace them. And that, Yuval Levin rightly argues, is dangerous and chaotic. It is a situation that threatens the structures that hold us together as a society.

How shall we begin the process of recreating the institutions that are so vital to our society? Yuval Levin offers an approach that sounds much like the Torah's notion of the half shekel. He writes:

All of us have roles to play in some institutions we care about, be they familial or communal, educational or professional, civic, political, cultural or economic. Rebuilding trust in those institutions will require the people within them — that is, each of us — to be more trustworthy. And that must mean in part letting the distinct integrities and purposes of these institutions shape us, rather than just using them as stages from which to be seen and heard. As a practical matter, this can mean forcing ourselves, in little moments of decision, to ask the great unasked question of our time: “Given my role here, how should I behave?” That’s what people who take an institution they’re

involved with seriously would ask. "As a president or a member of Congress, a teacher or a scientist, a lawyer or a doctor, a pastor or a member, a parent or a neighbor, what should I do here?"

Rather than pointing the finger at someone else, how do I understand my role in strengthening the institutions that are so important to the architecture of our society? Just as every Jew had a contribution to make to the Temple in the form of a half shekel, all of us have a role to play.

We are in an election year, and our votes matter. When we vote, let us consider the candidate that not only tears down and criticizes the institutions of American life, but also the ones who offer thoughtful solutions about how to rebuild them!

Our portion is a great reminder that when we all work together, we can build structures, and institutions, worthy of God's presence. Every institution should be able to withstand thoughtful criticism, but we dismantle our institutions at our own peril.

Goethe had it right.

Music is liquid architecture; architecture is frozen music, and together we have the power to create a symphony for society through the instruments of institutions.