

Parshat Terumah
The Partnership Between God and Humans
Dr. Susan Hornstein - Class of 2025

שְׁלַח אֶת-עַמִּי וְיַעֲבֹדוּנִי

Let my people go, that they may serve Me
(Shemot 7:16, 7:26, 9:1, 9:13)

This mantra is repeated throughout the early portions of *Sefer Shemot*. The first part of the sentence is accomplished by *parshat Beshalach*: *B'nai Yisrael* are free from Egyptian bondage. But freedom was not the end goal. They must serve God, first in the desert, and ultimately in the land chosen by God, *Eretz Yisrael*.

The second segment of *Sefer Shemot* takes place primarily at *Har Sinai*. In fact, *B'nai Yisrael* remain there for 10 months. *Har Sinai* has already been important in the story, since Moshe's initial meeting with God at the burning bush was said to have taken place there, and Moshe's first meeting with Aharon before they approached Pharaoh took place there too. Of course the revelation of the Torah takes place there, and Moshe ascends the mountain both times that he receives the Tablets. Now, the foot of *Har Sinai* is the location where *B'nai Yisrael* will build the *mishkan*, the Tabernacle, and the *mishkan* will be the portable extension of *Har Sinai*, as the meeting place with God, and the place where the service of God will take place.

The laws describing the building of the *mishkan* and its contents begin in our *parsha*. It is the first act of creation of the new People of Israel. Until now, God has been the Creator. But now, God will command an act of creation, and *B'nai Yisrael* will execute it.

Before *B'nai Yisrael* have a chance to actually build the *mishkan*, a human will take over another act of creation from God. After the revelation on *Har Sinai*, Moshe ascended the mountain and received the Tablets, carved by the finger of God. These tablets were the *ot brit*, the physical symbol and reminder of the covenant forged between God and *B'nai Yisrael* upon the revelation of the Torah. But, as we will read in *parshat Ki Tisa*, this covenant was not sustainable. It contained no room for human fallibility. And when the people failed, as humans will, by building the Golden Calf, this covenant, and its symbol, the God-made Tablets, were broken. Moshe must ascend *Har Sinai* again and negotiate a new covenant. This covenant contained the essential element of *teshuva*, allowing recovery from sin through repentance. The new Tablets, the *ot brit* of the new covenant, were a joint project, commanded by God, but created by Moshe.

The first article that God commands to be built is the *aron*, the Ark. The Torah describes the design and materials for the Aron, and then states:

וְנָתַתְּ אֶל-הָאָרֶן אֶת הַעֵדוּת אֲשֶׁר אֶתֵּן אֵלֶיךָ:

Place into the Ark the Testimony that I will give you. (Shemot 25:16)

Later, when Moshe retells this story before entering Canaan, he says:

וְאֶפֶן וְאָרַד מִן־הַהָר וְאָשַׁם אֶת־הַלְחָת בְּאָרוֹן אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי וַיְהִיו שָׁם כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוִּי ה':

Then I left and went down from the mountain, and I deposited the tablets in the ark that I had made, where they still are, as Adonai had commanded me.

(Shemot 10:5)

The *Edut*, the testimony, seems to be the Tablets, the symbol of the covenant. But which tablets? The consensus of the commentaries seems to be that both sets of tablets were carried in the *aron*—the original set, carved by God, and broken by Moshe, and the second set, commanded by God, and carved by Moshe.

Earlier in Shemot, we read about another symbolic reminder of a covenant. After God begins the process of providing manna for *B'nai Yisrael* during their travels in the wilderness we read:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן קַח צִנְצֻנֹת אַחַת וְתֵן־שָׁמָּה מִלֶּאֱהֶעֱמָר מִן וְהִנֵּחַ אֹתוֹ לִפְנֵי ה' לְמִשְׁמֶרֶת לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם:

And Moses said to Aaron, “Take a jar, put one *omer* of manna in it, and place it before Adonai, to be kept throughout the ages.”

כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיְנִיחֵהוּ אַהֲרֹן לִפְנֵי הַעֲדֻת לְמִשְׁמֶרֶת:

As Adonai had commanded Moses, Aaron placed it before the *Edut*, to be kept. (Shemot 16:33-34)

Although the *aron* had not yet been built, the Torah’s mention that Aaron placed the jar of manna “before the *Edut*” leads us to believe that the jar of manna was also placed in the *aron*. The manna itself was a bit of a paradox. As my Maharat colleague, Hannah Ruimy, mentioned in her presentation on *parshat Beshalach*, the manna represented a reversal, because food was generally grown by humans, but was here produced by God. And the manna also represented the first time that God demanded obedience from the new People of Israel, as they were commanded to observe Shabbat in the context of the manna.

Throughout the rest of their travels, *B'nai Yisrael* carried the *mishkan*, a place in which humans emulated God’s own act of creation of the world by creating a meeting place between humans and God. In it, they built the *aron*, which carried the Tablets, now broken, that were created by God, the Tablets commanded by God but created by Moshe, and the flask of manna, the food created by God.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in *Covenant and Conversation*, has a fascinating interpretation of the two sets of tablets. He explains that the first Tablets, produced entirely by God, represent the *Torah Shebichtav*, the written Torah, produced entirely by God, and revealed to Moshe and *B'nai Yisrael* during the revelation on *Har Sinai*. The second Tablets, a partnership between God and Moshe, represent *Torah Sheb'al Peh*, the Oral Torah, which is produced throughout the rest of time through human interpretation of the written Torah. Rabbi Sacks says:



The difference between the Written and Oral Torah is profound. The first is the word of God, with no human contribution. The second is a partnership - the word of God as interpreted by the mind of man. (*Covenant and Conversation*, Ki Tissa, 5767, 5773)

Torah is incomplete without both segments - the entirely divine segment, and the segment in which humans interpret and apply its laws and guidance. This human involvement and development is what ensures Torah's applicability in every day and age. *B'nai Yisrael* carried the *aron* with them throughout their journeys, ultimately installing it in the *Beit HaMikdash*. Within it, they carried the reminders of God's covenants, and God's partnership with humans in creating and sustaining *B'nai Yisrael*. Our relationship with God is a partnership, and the Torah is a partnership; it is incomplete without our active involvement and application of its laws to our own lives.



Susan Hornstein is an educator and a lifelong student. Susan holds a BA from Brandeis University and a PhD in Cognitive Psychology from Brown University. She grew up in Boca Raton, Florida, where her family was instrumental in founding the Jewish community.

Susan completed a long career in User Experience, designing computer systems and websites so that their users would be able to understand them. Susan has also spent many years as a Jewish educator. A passionate student of Jewish text and Hebrew language, she has learned at Hebrew University, Michlelet Bruria (now Ohr Torah Stone) and Yeshivat Har Etzion, and has taught in Hebrew Schools, synagogues, and groups around Central New Jersey. She has tutored several dozen Bar and Bat Mitzvah students, some of whom have gone on to tutor students of their own. Susan is a founder and gabbait of the Women's Tefillah Group of Raritan Valley, where she works on education and inclusiveness. She has served on the boards of her Modern Orthodox synagogue and mikvah.

Susan is also a musician, and is the conductor of the Central Jersey chapter of HaZamir, The International Jewish Teen Choir. She lives in Highland Park, New Jersey with her husband, and has three grown children, one in the Washington area, and two in Israel, all working in Jewish education.