

In the Torah, the only sisterly relationship we know about is that between Leah and Rachel; and the Torah is mainly silent about their relationship. Perhaps that is why it is so startling to come across the word "sister" in this week's Torah portion.

For one thing, it seems so out of place. Parashat Terumah is all about the construction of the mishkan, the Tabernacle where God will dwell among the Israelites (Exodus 25: 8). Most of parashat Terumah is taken up with the description of its construction, the materials to be used and how to put everything together. In fact, the construction of the Tabernacle will be the main focus of the rest of the book of Exodus. It is a do-it-yourself instruction book for creating sacred space. What do siblings have to do with this? It is all in the directions for putting things together:

*As for the tabernacle, make it of ten strips of cloth; make these of fine twisted linen, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, with a design of cherubim worked into them. The length of each cloth shall be twenty-eight cubits, and the width of each cloth shall be four cubits, all the cloths to have the same measurements. Five of the cloths shall be joined to one another, and the other five cloths shall be joined to one another. Make loops of blue wool on the edge of the outermost cloth of the one set; and do likewise on the edge of the outermost cloth of the other set: make fifty loops on the one cloth, and fifty loops on the edge of the end cloth of the other set, the loops to be opposite one another. And make fifty gold clasps, and couple the cloths to one another with the clasps, so that the tabernacle becomes one whole.*

Exodus 26:1-6

This is where reading a translation gets frustrating, because what we're looking for just doesn't show up in the English. In Hebrew it is evident in the term joined to one another or even just one another. The Hebrew phrase reads chobra isha el achota, "a woman joined to her sister." Obviously, this must be a technical term because the commentators ignore it. Ibn Ezra, the philological expert, explains that this phrase is used with objects that are feminine nouns. (Similarly, the masculine term ish el achiv "a man and his brother" is used in Exodus 25:20 to describe the positioning of the two golden cherubim on top of the ark.) While this is straightforward and logical, it does not convey the beauty and poetry of the phrase. These objects may be *joined to each other* (Exodus 26:3), *opposite one another* (Exodus 26:5), or as it appears one more time in Exodus 26:17: *parallel to each other*. Terming it as isha el achota, a "woman to her sister," creates an image of support that is far beyond sewing cloths together, or lining up planks. It says something deeper about this building, this mishkan (tabernacle), where God's presence will dwell.

At the very beginning of the parashah, we are told that the mishkan and its furnishings will be built out of items that are freewill gifts. Everything in this Tabernacle is given with love; everything has meaning beyond its intrinsic material value. We often speak of items that are important to us as having sentimental value. Not so here; the act of giving something freely bestows upon it a spiritual value.

The act of building the Tabernacle draws us into a closer relationship with God, a familial relationship. There are many ways of symbolizing our relationship with the Divine. Often it is viewed as a parent-child relationship. At times, it is also a spousal relationship. Now, with the building of the tabernacle there is the potential for a sibling relationship. The very walls of the

mishkan reflect this - it is the closeness of *isha el achota* "a woman to her sister." (If a feminine image of the mishkan sounds far-fetched, take a look at the Talmud's description of how the curtains draped over the Tabernacle. "The School of R. Ishmael taught: What did the Tabernacle resemble? A woman who goes in the street and her skirts trail after her." *Shabbat* 98b)

Interestingly, this odd phrase *isha el achota*, appears in one other book of the Bible. When the prophet Ezekiel has his vision of God and four heavenly creatures, each with four faces and four wings, he describes how Each one's wings touched those of the others (Ezekiel 1:9); the Hebrew is almost the same phrase found in Exodus 26:3 *joined to one another*, both meaning "a woman joined to her sister." Ezekiel continues to describe the structure of these creatures, their wheeled conveyance and an expanse above their head: *Under the expanse each had one pair of wings extended toward the others (isha el achota)...*(Ezekiel 1:23). A little bit later, Ezekiel recounts: *Then a spirit carried me away and behind me I heard a great roaring sound: "Blessed is the Presence of the Lord, in His place," with the sound of the wings of the creatures beating one against the other (isha el achota)...*(Ezekiel 3:12-13). Here, we find the phrase *isha el achota* in a situation that makes Ezekiel aware of his proximity to the Divine presence. The words spoken by these heavenly creatures are so stirring that they have become part of the *kedusha*, the blessing in the amidah that praises God's Holiness, recited only with a *minyan*, a community, present. Both in the construction of the Tabernacle and in Ezekiel's vision, we find the unusual phrase *isha el achota* "a woman to her sister" in situations of drawing near to God.

The purpose of the mishkan is to give God a symbolic presence within the community. Cassuto explains it as being "a tangible symbol of God's presence among them." This Divine "dwelling place" denotes a relationship with God. Beforehand, God dealt with individuals: the patriarchs and matriarchs, Moses, etc. Now, when we join together and function as a community, God will be in our midst. We are all aware of the importance of community in Judaism. Certain things can only take place in a community; it is the preferred mode for prayer and study. Community provides us the opportunity to say "*Blessed is the Presence of the Lord, [from] His place...*" *Terumah* teaches that joining together brings God nearer to us. Joining together can be done in many ways. If done wholeheartedly with mutual support as "a woman to her sister," God's presence, the *shekhinah*, dwells in our midst. Some of us are the cloth of the tabernacle, others are the planks, but we are incomplete as individuals. We must be *joined to one another (isha el achota) with the clasps, so that the tabernacle becomes one whole.* (Exodus 26:6)

This is not something that happens automatically. The instructions for constructing the mishkan are long and detailed. As is described in Exodus 35, both men and women were involved in the different aspects of building the mishkan. Beyond erecting a structure, or even forming a community, the establishment of the mishkan is the creation of a family. Turning community into family requires sensitivity and energy. "I don't believe an accident of birth makes people sisters or brothers. It makes them siblings, gives them mutuality of parentage. Sisterhood and brotherhood is a condition people have to work at." (Maya Angelou)

We read in the Torah, and we know from our own lives, that we do not always succeed at this work. Usually, hopefully, the bonds that keep us joined to one another, the clasps that make us a whole, are sturdy enough to withstand the pressure. When we can build on these bonds of sisterhood and brotherhood, we too create an environment for holiness in our midst.