Tonight is special for me in a few ways.

It's my first Shabbat back after two away, on in Israel and one with 5,000 Jewish teens at the BBYO International Convention in Philadelphia. It's Sisterhood Shabbaton, which is always special, a weekend I look forward to, and it also happens to be my twenty-first wedding anniversary.

I mention that not because you need details. You don't. And not because you need to give me gifts. Like many couples who have been married more than twenty years, we got each other a very romantic gift this afternoon. New frying pans. Seriously. We both independently bought — or intended to buy — the exact same set of pans we saw at Costco. Nothing says romance like non-stick Teflon.

But anniversaries have a way of making you reflective. They make you ask: What sustains a relationship over time? What actually allows two human beings to remain connected across decades of change?

This week's Torah portion, Terumah, from the later half of the book of Exodus, offers an unexpected answer.

In this week's parasha, God says:

"Let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them."

The rabbis of Jewish midrash imagine Moses stunned when he hears this divine command.

They picture him turning to God and saying something like this:

Ribbono shel Olam, Master of the Universe:

The highest heavens cannot contain You.

The vastness of space cannot contain You.

The whole universe cannot contain You.

And You are asking for a structure made of acacia wood? Curtains? Clasps of gold? This is where You intend to dwell?

You’re not going to fit. And I’m not sure You’re going to like it.

The midrash imagines God responding gently:

I am not asking you to contain Me. I am asking you to prepare a place where My presence can be felt alongside you, with you, amongst you and the people.

Build the sanctuary according to the pattern you are shown. Arrange the boards. Weave the fabrics. Create the space. And I will contract My presence and dwell there, and we will be there together.

The word the rabbis use is striking. They say God will perform tzimtzum — a contraction.

Which sounds almost impossible.

How does the Infinite contract?

How does the Boundless focus into the finite?

The midrash is not trying to solve physics. It is trying to teach us something about relationship.

God does not overwhelm the Mishkan — a word that means container, what we call a sanctuary; God does not overwhelm the space with infinite intensity. God gathers and focuses divine presence so as to create a space where human beings can stand in

relationship to God without being suffocated, overwhelmed, overpowered.

The Holy One holds back a bit of God's self and makes room for encounter, with us, with human beings who God loves. And who's love God desires more than anything.

Centuries later, the mystic Rabbi Isaac Luria the founder of Kabbalism would take that word **tzimtzum** in a cosmic direction by asking a deeper question: If God fills all reality, how can anything else exist at all? How can there be a world?

His answer was daring. Before creation, God withdrew. God contracted divine presence just

enough to make room for something other than God. The world exists because God made space.

So we have two steps to the act of tzimtzum.

In one, God steps back to allow existence.

In the other, God concentrates presence to allow relationship.

Rabbi Shai Held suggests that we hold both.

Love requires space.

Love requires presence.

If there is no space, the other disappears inside you.

If there is no presence, connection slowly thins out.

And somewhere in that tension is covenant.

There is a poem by one of my teachers and mentors, Rabbi Harold Schulweis, that I always think of when I reflect on the careful balance that love requires. The poem is called Between.

It is only a few lines, but it reframes everything.

Rabbi Schulweis writes that God is not found only “in me” or “in you,” but between us.

God is known not in isolation, not in lonely power, but in kinship, in friendship, in the raising up of one another.

And then he says something extraordinary:

To know God is to know others.

To love God is to love others.

To answer God is to respond to the claims and obligations that arise between us.

Between us.

Not hovering above us.

Not locked inside us.

Between.

If Luria teaches that God makes space for the world, and the midrash teaches that God gathers presence into the Mishkan, Schulweis reminds us where that presence is ultimately felt.

In the space between human beings who choose to remain in relationship.

And anyone who has ever been in any kind of loving relationship knows that this space is fragile, even if it's built on years and decades of marriage and friendship.

It can collapse if we crowd it.

It can wither if we neglect it.

But when we tend to it, something holy emerges.

As I mentioned, tonight happens to be my twenty-first wedding anniversary. That means Sharon has been married to a rabbi for twenty-one years — which, like dog years, may actually count as more than twenty-one regular years.

There should probably be a medal. And not of the frying pan variety.

But anniversaries do make you reflective. They make you ask what sustains connection over time.

If there is one lesson twenty-one years reinforces, it is that you cannot remain connected to another human being without learning this rhythm.

Space and presence.

Space and presence.

The Jewish theologian and philosopher Martin Buber helps articulate why. Before we can enter real

relationship, he says, we must recognize the other as truly other. Not an extension of our needs. Not a projection of our expectations. A separate soul standing across from us.

That recognition creates distance.

And then comes the second movement: turning toward. Choosing encounter. Choosing attentiveness.

Without distance, relationship becomes control.

Without turning toward, it becomes indifference.

That is true in marriage. It is true in friendship. It is true in parenting. It is true in community.

I have sat with couples where every disagreement felt like a crisis. There was no room for difference. Every distinction felt threatening. The relationship became tight, airless.

I have sat with others who were so careful about independence that they stopped reaching for one another at all. There was plenty of autonomy. Very little warmth.

The work is almost always the same. Relearning how to step back without stepping away. Relearning how to draw near without overwhelming.

It’s a lot like dancing. You move together, sometimes in different directions, careful not to step on each other’s toes, but still closely connected and in tune to each other and to the soundtrack of life playing in the background.

Parents know this dance well. If you never contract, your child cannot grow. If you contract too much, they feel alone.

Communities know this dance too.

And tonight, on Sisterhood Shabbaton, we are celebrating people who understand this instinctively.

Sisterhood creates space. It creates room for women's leadership, for connection, for support that is distinct and powerful. That space strengthens this congregation.

And Sisterhood is deeply present. Through programming, generosity, hospitality, scholarship, advocacy, and quiet acts of care that shape Temple Sholom in ways we sometimes only notice when we stop and look carefully.

Space and presence.

The Mishkan — the biblical sanctuary on which this congregation is modeled — reflects this wisdom. God does not flood it with infinite force. God gathers

divine presence into a form human beings can stand within. The Holy One makes encounter possible.

If the Infinite can contract in order to create space for relationship, then human beings, created in God's image, can practice our own small forms of tzimtzum.

How do you practice tzimtzum?

In a disagreement, ask yourself: can I make room for another perspective?

In a busy week, can I gather myself and be fully present for someone who needs me?

In a community filled with different personalities and convictions, can we allow room for one another while still choosing to show up? Can we do that in relationship with the diverse communities of our city, province, and nation?

Some of you here tonight are in long marriages. Some are newly married. Some are single. Some are widowed. Some carry wounds from relationships that never became sanctuaries.

This teaching belongs to all of us.

Every sacred bond in our lives asks the same question:

Can we make room for another soul without erasing ourselves?

Can we draw near without crowding?

Terumah reminds us that holiness is not built only with gold and acacia wood. It is built with restraint. With attentiveness. With humility.

The verse does not say, “I will dwell in it.”

It says, “I will dwell among them.”

Among.

Between.

In the space that is carefully made and faithfully inhabited.

On an anniversary, you realize that relationships are less like monuments and more like the Mishkan, the

portable sanctuary in the wilderness. Assembled. Disassembled. Carried forward. Rebuilt in new terrain. Adjusted as we change.

Still in progress.

And maybe holiness always is.

The sanctuary in the wilderness was taken apart and rebuilt again and again. Nothing frozen. Just people willing to keep showing up and building together.

Twenty-one years later, I’m grateful for the chance to keep showing up and building together.

Even if sometimes that means discovering that romance now comes in a non-stick set of three.

And may those frying pans — and the relationships we all tend — last at least another twenty-one years.

Shabbat Shalom.