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How much space should I take up?

D'var Torah for Terumah

by RABBI ORA NITKIN-KANER • 2/4/2022 | 3 Adar I 5782

As a rabbi, I think a lot about how much space I take up. The reality is that in Jewish communities, rabbis are given a lot of airtime; when people see you as very learned and/or moral, they assume that you have wisdom to share and they invite you to share it. Unfortunately, this can further inflate the egos of rabbis (many of them cis men), and reinforce detrimental power dynamics in our communities.

As a 38-year-old cis female Ashkenazi rabbi, I don't have an easy answer for these questions of space and power. I'm responsible for holding space for Jews to dream, live, and teach Jewishly, and this often has me erring on the side of listening. But as a youngish female rabbi in a traditionally male role, sometimes I need to get louder in order to be heard and respected as a rabbi.

It's a tightrope walk, and an ever-present question: Should I get quieter or less obtrusive in this moment? Or would it help to take up more space?

In Judaism, this idea of deliberate self-contraction comes from this week's parsha, Terumah. In Terumah, Moses is taught how to build God a sanctuary in which God can 'dwell.' According to one midrash, Moses says to God, "Master of the Universe, the highest heavens cannot contain You, and yet You say, 'Let them make me a sanctuary?!'" In other words, 'How will You possibly fit?!' God replies by saying that God will "contract" (metzamtzem) in order to fit into the physical sanctuary (Pesikta DeRav Kahana 2:10). According to some sages, then, tzimtzum (self-contraction) is what allows holiness to be present among us.

As a blanket statement, we could say that if you have all the privilege, you should self-contract in order to make room for other voices and more holiness in community. But the reality is that it's rare to find a person whose identity is wholly on the side of privilege or wholly disadvantaged. It's always a tightrope to walk.

My question for you, heading into Shabbat Terumah, is: In what ways do you practice tzimtzum (self-contraction)? When would your family, friends, coworkers, community, city, benefit from hearing other voices instead of yours? And in what ways would your family, friends, coworkers, community, city, benefit from hearing more of your particular wisdom and your unique voice?

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