

## **Introduction to CMI - Parashat Vayakhel – March 3, 2024**

### **Rabbi Daniel Schaefer**

Thank you so much. It is really wonderful to be here with you this morning. I'm grateful to Sarah, Michael, David and the entire search committee for all the time they devoted getting to know me and making this moment possible. To all the staff and members of the community who took the time to sit down with me and share their connection to CMI and their hopes for the future, thank you.

If we're meeting today for the first time, it's great to meet you. What do you need to know about me?

I was born at Yale-New Haven Hospital, went to kindergarten at Spring Glen Elementary, and graduated from Cheshire High School. I had the good fortune to grow up in this community and celebrate countless holidays, lifecycles, and *simchas* in this sanctuary.

Mishkan Israel is a place that is deeply meaningful to me and my family.

It is still a little unbelievable that I get the chance to come home and serve this community (pending the results of the upcoming vote).

I am incredibly grateful that I got to grow up in this synagogue. The beautiful music, deep intellectual engagement, and commitment to social justice all shaped my Jewish identity. When I was growing up, I found it incredibly meaningful to know that I belonged to an ancient people, filled with stories and history that have shaped civilizations over millennia and a deep well of wisdom that remains relevant today.

Because of my family, Mishkan Israel, Rabbi Brockman, Makom Hebrew High School, trips to Israel, and independent study, I developed a deep appreciation for this inheritance and a curiosity to continue seeking and learning to try and understand what I had yet to discover. I became a rabbi because I love studying Torah, singing Shabbat songs, and building community through food, humor, and repairing the world.

And I want to share the gift that I was given - the understanding of how special it is to be a part of the Jewish tradition and Jewish people. I want to pass down that feeling, that sense of meaning, belonging, and purpose to the next generation.

It's a little daunting to return to a place where my family has belonged for four generations, where my mom was President, my Dad gets to the synagogue an hour before me to sell bagels, and my nieces and nephew roam the hallways.

I could tell you that my rabbinic internships, four years at a reform synagogue, or two years at Georgetown University fully prepared me for this role, but I actually think everything I did before rabbinical school was much more important. Working at a wilderness therapy program, serving in a Jewish service corps, and working with social entrepreneurs shaped my values and worldview. They helped me take what I learned growing up and put it into practice. Those experiences, the opportunity to create and learn, fail, and try again shaped my understanding of what it means to be Jewish and my vision for building Jewish community.

And my vision for leadership, creating Jewish community, and meeting the needs of the moment is laid out perfectly in this week's Torah portion, Vayakhel, when we finally witness the

construction of the mishkan, the portable sanctuary that the Israelites brought with them through their forty years in the wilderness and entry into the land of Israel. Mishkan, the namesake of our synagogue, means “dwelling place” and it is where The Divine Presence dwelt amongst our ancestors.

It doesn't always get the most attention because there isn't a thrilling narrative or compelling character development associated with it, but its description and construction take up a good part of the book of Exodus, and in this week the gathering of materials and assembly actually begins.

The way to build a dwelling place for the Divine is still relevant today. It doesn't depend on access to gold, silver, acacia wood, and dolphin skin, but rather the full participation of the community and, *nadav lev* - a generous heart, a phrase repeated over and over in Vayakhel. Every person whose heart moves them is to bring an offering to teach us that a place becomes holy when everyone is invited to contribute, included, and able to participate and when all that is given is given voluntarily, with a spirit of generosity and an open heart.

It's what makes the mishkan more than a physical structure. It's what makes it a place for God to dwell.

The person charged with overseeing its construction is Betzalel. An 18th century Hasidic rabbi, The Degel Machaneh Ephraim, explains that while Betzalel was a wise craftsman, his real gift was that he was a student and teacher of Torah. And for me, Torah is at the center. It is our Tree of Life, what has sustained and connected us for thousands of years. It contains not only the instructions for the building of the mishkan, but according to the Jewish mystics, the instructions for the Creation of the Universe, and even the blueprint for how we build our Mishkan today.

As another Hasidic master, the Kedushat Levi, explains: Moses and the generation of the wilderness built the particular form of their mishkan according to the qualities of worship and prophecy they attained at Mt. Sinai. But in every generation we need to build our mishkan (and our Mishkan Israel) - according to the prophecy that is attained in our generation.

In every generation, we are required to rebuild this holy place according to our wisdom and understanding, but that the outline of our ancestors can continue to show us the way, by reminding us that we must invite everyone to join in and enable them to participate, that Divinity will be tangibly present when everyone brings their offering with a generous heart, and that the wisdom of Torah can serve as our blueprint as we seek to navigate whatever the future holds.

Thank you all for being here and for this opportunity. Don't forget to vote, “yes” on the upcoming ballot initiative.