

In this week's parashah, *Terumah*, literally, "donation," or "offering," we have the introduction to a concept that stretches over multiple *parshiyot* and has troubled ancient commentators and b'nei mitzvah students alike: the *mishkan*, the dwelling place for God. Why, wonder bnei mitzvah students and ancient commentators, why on earth would a non-corporeal God bother to command the community to build an elaborate house for Her to dwell in?

In my studies this week, I found an answer that I hadn't seen before. The *parashah* opens with Hashem's instruction to Moshe, "Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; from all whose hearts prompt them to give, you shall take my offering". It goes on to describe objects and labor that the Israelites are to donate for the building of the sacred dwelling. Rabbi Avital Hochstein, a New York based Torah scholar, notes the parallel clauses in that verse, the repetition of the words, "take," and "offering." She suggests: "This play on words raises the possibilities that the taking is either by Israel or from Israel, "Take for yourselves my offering to you" or "take from yourselves the offering that is for me." In other words, there are in fact two distinct but intertwined commands in this opening verse. If we flesh out the implication, we get: "Tell the Israelites to take from themselves offerings to build the *Mishkan* for me from all whose hearts shall prompt them to give," and "you shall take from me the offering I give you of Torah."

Lest this seem like a venture too far into semantic weeds, I find this significant, because it points to an answer to the previous question of why. If we understand the building project to be in a dialogue or dance with God's gift of Torah, then it becomes not about the house itself, but about the relationship.

God, as it were, gives us Torah. But, if such a thing can surmised about God, God doesn't just want the people to take the Torah and run with it. There is a danger, perhaps, that having received Torah, the ever-evolving blueprint for how to function as a people, the Jewish people will think that there is no need for further interaction with God. And so, Rabbi Hochstein writes, "God here is giving us one possible way of dealing with this danger, and that is to turn the tables by recognizing them and naming the need of the giver. By turning Himself into the one who then requests, God engenders a cycle of giving."

Of course, the value of Torah cannot be quantified. Neither can the value of the communal project of building the mishkan. And since they can't be quantified, they can never be equalized out. Perhaps that is the point. Reading Rabbi Hochstein's commentary reminded me of the concept of "social debt," which David Graeber explores in a book I read last spring, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*. One anecdote that particularly struck me was his description of the Tiv culture in rural Nigeria, wherein the appropriate practice among women was to be constantly, slightly, casually in debt to each other. For example, if one woman gave another three eggs, he writes,

"One did not have to bring back eggs, but one should bring something back of approximately the same value. One could even bring money . . . – provided one did so at a discreet interval, and above all, that one did not bring the exact cost of the eggs. It had to be either a bit more or a bit less. To bring back nothing at all would be to cast oneself as an exploiter or a parasite. To bring back an exact equivalent would be to suggest that one no longer wishes to have anything to do with the neighbor."

Through this endless exchange of not-fully-repaid gifts, he concludes that the Tiv women “were continually creating their society.” (p.105)

Likewise, in this *parasha*, through inviting us into mutual but not equivalent giving, God invites us into relationship.

I thought of this concept often after giving birth. So many people in the community helped out in so many ways – helping us to paint our home, lending supplies we needed, doing errands – that there is no way that I could pay back all of the social debt, even if I wanted to. But I don’t want to, because I prefer to be entangled in a web of obligation, knowing that I owe favors that may or may not be called in, knowing that as I have received, so too, I am obligated to give, especially things that are hard to monetarily quantify. What is the worth of doing a shopping run? While of course it is possible to pay someone to do it, and therefore answer the question, I find it preferable not to define it, and to trust that the favors we do for each other in community, the ways we continually obligate ourselves to each other build community precisely *because* they do not equalize out.

For that matter, can we quantify the value of welcoming a baby into the community during a Shabbat morning service? Can we quantify the value of receiving a delivery of soup when we’re sick? Or the value of friends and community members showing up for a shiva minyan when we’re grieving?

I ask these questions not only rhetorically, but also because, in a world where some money is necessary to run a community, it is sometimes necessary to conceive of the worth of community to our own lives in quantitative terms.

We are in a process right now in our community of trying to determine what is the right way to ask people give, what is the right expectation of what people should give - in order for this community to logistically and ethically function.

It is of course a pragmatic question, but it is also an ethical, and dare I say religious question, as I hope this parashah makes clear. The nature of the relationships we build in this community are at least partially determined by what we think the community is worth to us, and in turn by how we are willing to obligate ourselves – our time, our money, our skills – to each other. For that reason, if you have not yet participated in one of our conversations about re-evaluating our dues process – even if you think that you don't care, or you will be fine with whatever the majority decides, I want to encourage you to join our last scheduled town hall meeting, to be held on March 4th. The conversation is not only about who should pay what, when, but also about what we value about this community, and how we feel obligated to give back. Having sat in on several of these conversations, I promise that they are enriching in their own right – pun intended. Even giving of your energy to participating in the conversation is an important contribution to the building of our mishkan, our sacred space.