

In this week's parashah, Terumah, revelation continues with what are increasingly intricate instructions. Two weeks ago, at Parashat Yitro, we received the 10 Commandments, the grand principles of the holy community our people were called to create. Last week, in Parashat Mishpatim, that drilled down into specific of day to day life – okay, we know murder is forbidden, for example, but what are the consequences when someone kills someone else, and in what contexts? And this week, in parashat Terumah, with Moshe still up on the mountain, receiving revelation, Hashem instructs Moshe to initiate a large scale collective building project, the *mishkan*.

In chapter 25 of Exodus, verse 2, Hashem instructs Moshe, “Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart is so moved. “After a long list of acceptable contributions, the purpose becomes clear: “And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.”

The first items described are, “gold, silver and copper.” Rashi comments “All these came (were brought) as voluntary gifts, each man giving as his heart prompted him, except that silver which was brought by all in equal quantities, a half shekel by each person.” In this case, Rashi is referring to the half-shekel silver tax, which will be announced at the beginning of Parashat Ki Tissa, two weeks from now, in Exodus Chapter 30. Rashi notes that the sockets and hooks used for fastening different part of the tabernacle are reported as being made from the mandatory half=shekel tax, whereas other silver utensils come as these free-will contributions.

I find this combination of mandatory and voluntary contributions for the creation of sacred space to be fascinating. It reminds me of a teaching from Masachet Kiddushin 31a in the Talmud, "Greater is the one who is commanded and does it, than one who is not commanded and still does it." As Rabbi Yael Splansky writes, “This seems counterintuitive. We might think it is better to do something voluntarily, out of the goodness of our hearts, because we want to do the right

thing rather than because Someone commanded us.” And she is right. But there are dangers in allowing our altruistic impulses to guide how much good we do, how much we contribute. Because our impulses are not consistent. As she notes, “Let's take the example of *nichum aveilim*, the mitzvah to comfort mourners. Making a shivah call is an awkward, inconvenient, emotionally difficult thing to do, and yet, without much thought or planning, we find ourselves walking up those front steps. We are duty-bound. More often than not there is no choice in it. There is only a call and a response. There is only the mitzvah to be fulfilled or ignored.”<sup>1</sup>

Part of having a spiritual life, of creating a sacred community, is deciding that we are each obligated to the project. That might mean showing up even when we don't feel like it, or donating to Talmud Torah even we don't have children in the school or our children are grown. There is something valuable about a baseline expectation that everyone contributes, and as Rashi notes, those contributions make the sockets and hooks – we might say, the nuts and bolts – of the mishkan, of the institutions we create. We can't have an institution that takes care of us without some core understanding that we are each obligated to give something, regardless of how we may be feeling about it in a given moment.

But as sacred community cannot just be transactional, and how beautiful the project is depends on people's creative energies, and what they are inspired to bring – and whether their inspiration is encouraged and accepted. I was very moved yesterday in Torah study, when a few of our members described their own experiences as unhoused people, dealing with charitable structures that did not consider them capable of offering meaningful contributions. One person commented that there seemed to be either a transactional expectation – you have “give back” in order to access these services, which was in its own way offensive, or an expectation that the givers and the receivers are two entirely different

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<sup>1</sup> [https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/commanded-ness#:~:text=There%20is%20a%20well%2Dknown,Babylonian%20Talmud%2C%20Kiddushin%2031a\).](https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/commanded-ness#:~:text=There%20is%20a%20well%2Dknown,Babylonian%20Talmud%2C%20Kiddushin%2031a).)

classes of people, and that those who receive couldn't have anything meaningful to give.

I think of how important this insight is when thinking about the Israelites, a formerly enslaved people finding their collective identity in the wilderness. All those generations in Egypt, their labor had been demanded and extracted from them. There had been no opportunity to explore whether or not their hearts were moved to give, and how much or what they might have to give. I can imagine how empowering it would be to be told: We need to create this together – what do you have to contribute? What would you *like* to contribute?

I have often said in the synagogue context that I think we spend too much time thinking about how to give people the Jewish experience that they want, and not nearly enough time figuring out how we can accept the gifts that people want to give. Most of us, I'm sure have something that we want to give, that is valuable to us, that we've worked hard at, that we wish we could share with others. It may be a physical object, of course, but it may also be a skill, a talent. And it's hard for a community to absorb all of these creative offerings. It is taught in Parashat Vayakhel, in a few weeks, that when the people actually start to bring their gifts, they bring so much that Moshe has to tell them to stop. Or HaChaim, in a commentary on Exodus 36, verse 7, teaches, "As an act of recognition, G'd miraculously absorbed all these donations and they were used in the Tabernacle, they were sufficient, none was rejected, i.e. remained unused."

We don't have a miraculous capacity to absorb everything that people want to give in our community, and so sometimes we fall short of the ideal of accepting everyone's gifts. And yet, I think it remains important to ask ourselves the question: how does my heart move me? What do I want to bring?