

This is not a building fund appeal, I promise. It's actually going to sound like it, but it's not.

It is also not a solicitation for the journal dinner (which you should come to, by the way, and get your reservations in!).

Or for the general operations of the shul (which definitely needs any support you can squeeze out right now).

And I promise I am not asking you to commit your kidney, although there is a woman in our community who needs one, as the bulletin describes, and I do think it is something to consider seriously.

But there is a passage in our parashah about giving that I want to dwell on and explore – its Rabbinic interpretations and elaborations open up some critical elements to consider whenever we are faced with the opportunity to give. So I invite you to hear it in light of whatever giving you are thinking about or being called to consider this week.

And if there is a sudden influx of checks in the shul office and kidneys – or contributions of time, money, and resources to other places and needs in the world, I'm sure that won't be a bad thing.

The second half of our parashah is the section of princely gifts. Upon Moshe's completion of the Mishkan, the prince of each tribe brought a starter kit of sorts to the Tabernacle, of supplies used for sacrifices, from utensils to food to animals. At the plain sense level of the text, this is not particularly noteworthy – leaders of the community contribute to a major communal institution.

But the midrashic tradition reminds us that there's always a story. And indeed every contribution, every gift, has a back-story. We are drawn to certain causes more than others. What, and when, and how much we give is personal, complicated, and always tied up with who

we are and who we want to be.

So a midrash cited by Rashi wonders why the Torah specifically tells us about this contribution and these contributors. So Rashi explains that the Torah is telling us here the end of a story. The princes had held back from contributing to the mishkan initially, saying, *יתנדבו צבור מה* – *"let the community give what they wish, and we'll fill in what's left."* When Bnei Yisrael – the common people – were so generous that they gave everything, the princes were disappointed, so they brought the setting stones for the priestly garments at the very end. Then, when it came time for gifts not for the construction of the Tabernacle, but for its functioning, they got in line first, to make sure they'd be able to contribute.

**רש"י במדבר ז'ג:** ויקריבו אותם לפני המשכן - שלא קבל משה מידם עד שנאמר לו מפי המקום. אמר רבי נתן מה ראו הנשיאים להתנדב כאן בתחלה, ובמלאכת המשכן לא התנדבו תחלה, אלא כך אמרו הנשיאים יתנדבו צבור מה שיתנדבו, ומה שמחסרין אנו משלימין, כיון שראו שהשלימו צבור את הכל, שנאמר (שמות לו, ז) והמלאכה היתה דים, אמרו מעתה מה לנו לעשות, הביאו את אבני השוהם והמלוואים לאפוד ולחשן, לכך התנדבו כאן תחלה:

*They placed them before the Mishkan - Because Moshe did not accept [the gift] from their hands until [so] instructed by the Omnipresent. R' Natan said, "Why did the leaders see fit to contribute here first, but for the materials of the Mishkan, they did not contribute first? Because the leaders said as follows: "Let the community contribute as they wish, and any shortfall, we will furnish." When they saw that the community had supplied everything, as it is said, "the material was sufficient" (Ex. 36:7), they said, "Now what can we do?!" They brought the onyx stones, and the stones set into the ephod and breastplate. This is why they contributed here at the outset. (Rashi Num. 7:3)*

This midrash is wonderfully complimentary of these leaders, painting a powerful picture of leadership. They had the wisdom to make room for the community, and then when the time is right, they led the way in the second phase of giving. There are times, this midrash tells us,

when it is appropriate to hold back from giving – to give others a chance, or to save one's gifts for a later time. Perhaps if the princes had not kicked off the functional giving phase – the costs of operation, the community would have been so drained from paying for the construction of the Tabernacle that they would not have been inspired to give to the ongoing costs. Letting people take the lead in the exciting parts, and then setting an example in the more mundane giving, the midrash tells us, was the powerful model of the *nesi'im*.

One great illustration: I was at a conference with Emory Professor Deborah Lipstadt, well known for her work exposing Holocaust deniers, and who was sued for libel by British historian David Irving. She won her case, but it cost her over a million dollars. As the process went on, she reached out to philanthropist Les Wexner to support her. Professor Lipstadt explained that while Mr. Wexner could easily have footed the whole bill, he insisted on paying a small amount and stepping back to invite others to take part. I quote Mr. Wexner, "The part that I am proud of is not that when history is told, the notion that one Jewish merchant (merchant?!) from Columbus, Ohio, cared enough to defend a Jewish studies professor from Atlanta. That isn't a great story. It's a good story, but it's not a great story. The great story should be that a network of people from all over the world came together, and they said they wanted to be part of it." (Beyond Success, by Randall J. Ottinger, p. 198) This is in keeping with Rashi's vision, I believe. Great princes know how and when to step back or invite collaboration in giving.

Which is why the Midrash Tanhuma I learned last night with my college hevruta Josh – and some of the insight which follows is his, and I thank him for it – was so very surprising.

**מדרש תנחומא (ורשא) פרשת נשא סימן כז:** ויקריבו נשיאי ישראל את מוצא בשעה שהכריז משה ואמר קחו מאתכם תרומה (שם/ שמות/ לה) מה עשו הנשיאים אמרו לא היה משה יודע לומר לנו אלא שנעשה את המשכן, מה עשו לא נתנו נדבה אמרו אלו עושין את המשכן ולנו הוא אומר שניתן נדבה, אמר להם הקב"ה חייכם שאני מודיע לכם שאיני צריך לכם, מה כתיב שם והם הביאו אליו עוד נדבה בבקר בבקר (שם/ שמות/ לו) א"ר יוחנן לשני בקרים הביאו כל נדבת המשכן והותירו...

*"The princes of Israel brought near" - you find that when Moses announced, "Take a*

*contribution from yourselves" (Ex. 35), what did the princes do? They said, "Moshe should have known to tell us that we should make the Mishkan!" What did they do? They didn't give a contribution. "They said, Bnei Yisrael is building the mishkan and Moshe is telling us to give contributions?!" The Blessed Holy One said to them, "By your life, I'll show you that I don't need you!" What is written there? "They brought him even more gifts daily" (Ex. 36). R. Yohanan said, in two mornings they brought the entire contributions for the Mishkan and they had left over... (Midrash Tanhuma Naso 27)*

This midrash spins the same story entirely differently. It tells us that when Moshe had put out the call for contributions to the building of the Tabernacle, the princes were *disinterested*. As one commentary to the midrash explains, the princes believed that the Divine presence would not dwell in the Mishkan because Bnei Yisrael had sinned with the Golden Calf. God simply would not be able to bear dwelling in a house they built when their same hands had contributed to the construction of an idol they worshipped. Even though the mishkan might have been meant as an atonement, it could not work. Why sink money into a failed mission – they wondered? אמרו אלו עושין את המשכן ולנו הוא אומר שניתן נדבה? *"They said, Bnei Yisrael is building the mishkan and Moshe is telling us to give contributions?!"* So they didn't give.

So God got mad.

And God says, you don't want to take part – I don't need you. There will be no part for you. Sure enough – the people brought, and there was nothing left for the princes to contribute. Their hands are absent from the structure of the mishkan – as a punishment.

I find this midrash equally powerful. There are times when it is wrong to step back. It is not uncommon when we consider giving that we do our research on a charity or a project and we are left uncertain. Is this the best place to give? Is this money really going to go to work? What will this person on the street do with my hard-earned dollars? Sometimes we delude ourselves into believing we can know everything, and we can have certainty about the moral excellence of our gifts, about their effectiveness.

And sometimes we can – and then we should act accordingly.

But sometimes we're also wrong, and we miss a chance to save a life, to be a part of something extraordinary, to change the world.

So we sit with two versions of the princes' gifts. For Rashi's midrash, they are to be praised for holding back and making room for others, learning when not to give, and from the Tanhuma they are forcefully critiqued for thinking they know enough to decide that the Tabernacle was not the best investment of their charity and resources.

No surprise here – I can't tell how you to navigate between these versions of the story. I can't tell you when to step back and make room and save our gifts for a right-er time, and when we are foolish to wait and we need a deep optimism and some kind of leap of faith that we know enough to try.

I can tell you that just like our princes – and we are princes – every gift has a story. Let's write ours thoughtfully, humbly, and courageously.