

Torah Portion: **Terumah**

(Book of Exodus)

The single-most important asset in any religious organization is the volunteer, the person who freely offers to take part in a project or enterprise, or undertake a task. Motivated by a faith grounded in a sense of community, they tend to see the cause as greater than themselves and their individual contribution as an important part of a collective effort.

The first biblical call for volunteers appears in the book of Exodus where God says to Moses: *“Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts, you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him. . . And let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.”* (Exo. 25:1 & 8) Not only were the ancient Israelites asked to contribute financially to the construction of their portable sanctuary, they were also required to build it. . .and that meant working together!

The French Catholic activist Charles Peguy once said “everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics.” Rabbi David Wolpe goes on to write, “Accomplishment entails the skills of organization, consensus building and negotiation. It may be true that, as the old saying has it, a camel is a horse designed by committee; but the world needs camels, too.”

It’s not easy working as a faith-based community volunteer, however Rabbi Israel Salanter, founder of the *Musar* movement (an effort to accompany ethical study with ethical conduct) taught “while engaging in community work, one must make three resolutions: Never lose one’s temper, never get tired, and never want to win.” Calmness and composure is a sign of respect. The expenditure of energy underscores the invigorating nature of the work, and putting aside the desire to win is being able to supplant the pronoun “I” with “We.” In explaining this teaching, David Wolpe writes, “Rabbi Salanter reminds us that to work with others in service to something greater than oneself is not a necessary drudgery but a sacred task.”

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