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Dvar Torah given at the Jewish Federation of Madison Board Meeting

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I had two fairly commonplace experiences this week – organizing my taxes and preparing for a Shaarei Shamayim board orientation for new members – and they got me thinking about priorities, both individual and communal.

Way back I had a professor in rabbinical school who led a conversation with us about the gap between our values – what we believe – and our actions – what we actually do on a day to day basis. You can imagine that a group of emerging Jewish leaders were able to easily articulate exactly what our beliefs were, and we seemed to think that our actions matched these beliefs.

He then asked us to take out our calendars and our checkbooks. There was an uncomfortable silence. Our calendars document how we spend our time, and our checkbooks – or maybe credit card bills – document how we spend our money. Neither really fudges the truth.

As individuals, it's an important question – how we actually spend our time and our money. It's good to review whether we really are matching our values – caring for family, building community, supporting those who are ill or who are poor, protecting the environment, or whatever – with how we fill up our days. Are we really allocating significant time and money to supporting our values?

I would also add, beyond the calendar and checkbook – does our daily behavior reflect our values? Do our actions at work and in our families shed light on whether we are enacting our values in every mundane or not so mundane action?

I also think we can apply these principles and questions to organizations. Does our programming schedule reflect our values? Do our budgets reflect our values? Do we set organizational priorities based on our values? Do we care for all members of the community? Do we respect each other, even when we disagree with each other? Are our communal policies and practices an outgrowth of our values?

In our Torah portion this week – Parashat Vayakhel-Pekudei – the Israelites are supposed to bring gifts for God as their heart moves them. Like any good fundraiser, Moses makes an appeal to the entire community. What's remarkable is that the giving is not forced. The text reads:

“Take from among you gifts to the Lord, *everyone whose heart so moves him* shall bring them—gifts for the Lord (Exodus 35:5).”

The Torah is reminding us of the importance of generosity, commitment, and open-heartedness both as individuals going about our lives and in working as a collective whose mission is to tend to the needs of the community. If we combine this with the whole range of Jewish values like *klal Yisrael* (being responsible for everyone in the community), *kavod* (respect), *hachnassat*

*orchim* (welcoming guests), and giving *tzedakah* (material support for those who are poor or vulnerable).

As you begin your board meeting, may you listen well to each other, give each other the benefit of the doubt, ask difficult and probing questions, and make decisions that really serve the needs of the entire community.