

Sermon
Parshat Shemini
כ"ח ניסן תשפ"א / April 10, 2021
Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz
B'nai Israel Congregation

April 15 is just a few days away! If this had been a normal year, then I know that the accountants in our midst would be tearing their hair out right now. But this was not a normal year, and so the IRS has extended the filing deadline for individuals to May 17. You can delay your panic for a few more weeks. But in the spirit of the tax season, I too have been flipping through Excel files and Google Sheets. Looking back at the past year, I cannot help but wonder: Where did all the money go? What did I spend money on this year? How did I allocate my resources? Incidentally, this week's *parsha*, Shemini, offers us some guidance about resource allocation: How *should* we aspire to use the resources at our disposal?

We begin in Parshat Ki Tisa, in the book of Exodus. The Israelites are growing impatient. Moses has not returned to them after ascending to the top of Mount Sinai. They fear that he may never return. Desperate, they turn to Aaron, Moses's brother, the future High Priest of Israel. They demand that he make for them a god. So, he asks them to bring their rings, their necklaces, their bracelets, all of their gold, a most precious resource, and he casts it in a mold to make a molten golden calf. He tries to distract the people, telling them that the festival celebration would be the next day, but they cannot be appeased. They arise the next day and worship this molten calf, and Aaron is partly to blame for their sin of idol worship.

Now, we fast forward to this week's *parsha*, Shemini. After a week-long ritual, the eighth and final day of this ordination ceremony bestows the *kehunah*, the priesthood, upon Aaron, his sons, and all of their descendants. Moses' instructions to Aaron on this eighth and

final day begin, קח לך עֵגֶל בֶּן־בָּקָר לְחַטָּאת, “Take a calf of the herd for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering, without blemish, and bring them before Adonai.”¹ Take the calf for a sin offering. Doesn’t that sound familiar? The very animal that Aaron helped the Israelites to fashion, the very animal that became an object of their worship, that very animal is to be taken by Aaron and offered on the altar as sin offering. What is the purpose of the sin offering? To bring about expiation, to allow one to atone for their wrongdoings and wipe clean their slate.

Rashi makes this explicit in his commentary, citing a *midrash*. Why should Aaron take the calf? To demonstrate to Aaron that the Holy Blessed One has granted him forgiveness by the means of *this* calf, for the wrongdoing that he committed with that calf. Before Aaron could fully accept upon himself the crown of the priesthood, he had to acknowledge his participation in the wrongdoing of the molten calf incident.

But the most astounding aspect of this particular moment in Parshat Shemini is that God intended for Aaron to see that a calf could be used for good, in service of God, rather than in direct violation of a commandment. God could have instructed him to offer some other animal for a sin-offering. But by commanding Aaron to use a calf, God compels him to stare into a mirror, to see the calf, to remember what it was like to fashion the golden one, and to recognize that it is not what is placed before you that matters, but how you choose to use it.

When Aaron was bullied by the Israelites to build for them a god, he had at his disposal a great deal of power and resources. In coming to him, the people put their faith and trust in Aaron. In listening to him and gathering up their resources, Aaron could have seen that he had influence and power. What he said and what he did made a difference for the people. Had he

¹ Leviticus 9:2.

been given a chance to go back in time, how might he have conducted himself differently? What could he have done with all of that gold? What could he have said that would have prevented them from their grave sin of idol worship? Now, in this moment of his ordination as High Priest of Israel, he stares once again at a calf, but this time he understands how to use it for good, for the benefit of himself and his family, and for the benefit of Israel. Life presents us with all sorts of resources: some rightfully earned, and others granted. The question that we must answer is *how* should we use the resources that are at our disposal?

When we talk about our resources, we typically think of our money. How do we spend it? What are our priorities? To put the question in a specifically Jewish context, we might consider how much we choose to give to *tzedakah*, how much we donate to charitable causes. A few months ago, I explored the concept of intentional giving when the Men's Club hosted me for one of their Jews & Brews sessions. At that time, I shared a model for intentional giving developed by Rabbi Danny Nevins, Dean of the Rabbinical School at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Using a well-designed Excel spreadsheet, Rabbi Nevins articulates how we might bring the Torah's models of agricultural tithes into the present day by allocating our resources in particular ways. His model considers our income, the amount of taxes we pay, our housing expenses, how much we pay for Jewish educational programs, congregational dues, and various other ways in which we might support the local community, and the broader Jewish community. It is not designed to offer hard and fast rules of how we should allocate our *tzedakah*, but it offers us a guide and helps us to be more intentional with our giving.

Many of us are blessed with adequate financial resources to support ourselves and our families. The challenge that we are presented with is how to use what, to a degree, is

additional. Do we splurge for the upgrades on that already fancy car? Or, do we make a gift to that organization? It may not be an either/or, but you understand the point. Parshat Shemini reminds us to take a good look at the resources in front of us and decide how best to utilize them. (Buying a nice car is not exactly idolatry, but decadence in the absence of generosity, may indeed be a modern form of that behavior.)

But one of the most striking aspects of Rabbi Nevins' tzedakah spreadsheet is that it takes into consideration the amount of time one volunteers to support Jewish religious and educational institutions. He reminds us that our financial resources are not our only assets. Our time is also an incredibly valuable resource, one that can also be used for good. A 2019 study by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that adults between the ages of 25 and 64 had between 4 and 5.5 hours of daily leisure time.² But that was in 2019! Anecdotally, I know that most adults, especially those with children at home, have had far fewer than 4 hours of leisure time each day during the most challenging months of the pandemic. But even if we assume that we have 4 hours of daily leisure time, time that is not spent sleeping, eating, working, and providing for our basic needs and the needs of our family members, that means that our "free time" is a valuable resource. It is not something to squander and waste. It is something to cherish and to think carefully about how exactly we use it. Knowing how little free-time we each have on a daily basis, perhaps it is worth doing some sort of "time audit" whereby we track how we personally spend the hours of our days. Then develop a "time budget," an aspiration for how we would like to spend our day. Our time is a valuable resource. It can be used for sacred and meaningful purposes, it can be used for mundane but necessary tasks, and

² <https://www.bls.gov/charts/american-time-use/activity-leisure.htm>.

it can be used unwisely. The challenge that Parshat Shemini sets before us is to consider how best to use our resources, how best to allocate our funds, and how best to schedule our days.

Tomorrow marks the beginning of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington's Sara & Samuel J. Lessans Good Deeds Week. B'nai Israel is participating through a project organized by our Day School Committee, in which all encouraged to participate by making snack bags that you can drop off at B'nai Israel, which will be distributed to the employees who tirelessly care for the older adult residents living in the Charles E. Smith Life Communities. You can learn more about how to participate by visiting our website. I share this with you because it is one such opportunity to budget your time differently in the coming week. Use some of your own time to do something good for the benefit of someone else. And when Good Deeds Week ends, you can and should continue to think carefully about how you spend your time, and how you might better allocate your resources in service of yourself, your family, *and* the wider community.

Last night, many households celebrated Shabbat with a rather strange custom: the *shlisel* challah, or the key challah. There is a custom dating back a few centuries that on the Shabbat immediately following Passover, you bake your challah into the shape of a key (some even put a real key inside of that challah), as a reminder that the key to our success is in the hands of God. The gates of blessing are closed and locked, and we pray to be granted the key with which we can open those gates and receive those blessings. Whether or not you did this last night, the image is what matters. When we look upon the *shlisel* challah, when we see the key before our eyes, we pray that God will help us to open ourselves up, to unlock the resources that are often tied up, whether they are dollars in the bank or hours in our day, and teach us to use them *l'tovah*, for good. Shabbat shalom.