

**The Mitzvah to Contribute**  
***Parashat Terumah***  
**February 28, 2009**  
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The Book of Exodus is neatly divided into three parts: (1) the Egyptian bondage—and the Exodus; (2) the giving of the laws; and (3) the description of the Tabernacle and its construction—the part we are reading right now.

From a dramatic standpoint, this last third may seem the least interesting. (In fact, in the film entitled, “The Ten Commandments,” it doesn’t appear at all). Yet, there’s something very special and very important about this third section of the Book that is lacking in the earlier material. It’s captured in the first few words of the parashah, and is reinforced throughout the last third of the book.

Yes, the Tabernacle is to be done according to the precise description that God provides. In that sense, it is the fulfillment of a command by God. Nothing unusual there. But, as the first verse of the parashah reminds us, the Tabernacle is to be constructed entirely from that which is voluntarily contributed. It all is summed up with that all-important word which gives its name to the parashah as a whole: *terumah*.

A *terumah* is a gift. But not all gifts are *terumot*. For example, a gift I give to a friend, or a family member—that’s not a *terumah*. Only a gift offered up to the community, without any expectation of a reward—is a *terumah*.

The word *terumah* comes from the verb *l’harim*, which means “to lift up.” A *terumah* is that which is lifted up and presented as a gift.

Had we only had the first 2/3 of Exodus, we wouldn’t know the importance of a *terumah*.

Yes, we would have known the value of freedom; yes, we would have known the importance of observing Jewish law. But we wouldn’t have known how important



it is for people to step forward and volunteer their time, their property and their services for the good of a community, a nation, a people.

The Bible begins by talking about individuals in the Garden of Eden. It moves through the patriarchal narratives talking about the evolving family from whom we are descended; and eventually, in Exodus, it focuses on the people, or the nation of Israel.

As human beings, we aren't completely fulfilled as individuals, or even as members of families. It's our identity as part of a people that reveals a deeper dimension of human existence. You can see that in the language of our parashah. The parashah speaks of "everyone whose heart moves him." "Moves him" to do what? To build a house for himself? To buy a birthday present for a member of his family? No. To contribute to the greater good. To take care of one's self may be important, but it is, literally, self-centered. To take care of one's family may be praiseworthy, but it is still ultimately a result of self-centered thinking and concern. But to contribute to the community puts oneself on the periphery rather than at the center.

We learn that explicitly when we think about that picture of the camp of the Israelites that we get at the beginning of the Book of Numbers: All the tribes have their place, perfectly positioned literally on the periphery of the camp; and in the center is the Tabernacle, constructed entirely from the free offerings of the generous hearts of the Israelites.

Essential to the notion of Terumah, of course, is that the offering be made without any expectation or hope of recognition or reward. As Antigonos Ish Socho teaches us in Pirkei Avot: "Don't be like slaves who serve the master for the sake of receiving a reward; be like slaves who serve the master unconditionally."

Honor and Recognition too often function as currency within the Jewish community. Too often, we find ourselves asking: "What can I get out of my involvement, my participation in this school, or shul, or charitable institution?" "What can be named after me?"—rather than, "What unique contribution can I make?"

About a hundred years ago, Hayyim Nachman Bialik, the great national poet of the Jewish People, captured the spirit of selfless dedication to the ideals of the nation in a poem entitled, “To the Volunteers”, written in 1899:

L’ezrat ha-am, l’ezrat ha-am!

Ba-meh? Al tish’alu—ba-asher nimitzah!

B’mi? Al tivdoku—kol libo yidvenu!

For the sake of the people:

“With what?”—Don’t ask: with whatever is around.

“With whom?”—Don’t worry: everyone will volunteer.”

(Literally, “everyone’s heart will move him”—a phrase which alludes to the verse in our parashah.)

That was a time, barely three years after the first Zionist Congress in 1896, when idealistic Jewish youth in Russia and elsewhere were volunteering to go to the Land of Israel to reclaim the soil, to build up the land. It was a stirring case of people willing to volunteer for the sake of the nation.

The Jewish community needs that spirit today. Some religious traditions focus on a person’s individual ability to commune spiritually with the Divine. The Jewish tradition, in contrast, asks us to join with the community to worship. Some religious traditions accept the fact that some will be sated, and others hungry; some will be sheltered, and others homeless; some will be comfortable, and others miserable.

Judaism teaches us a different message: that each of us is responsible for one another; that if you are suffering, I am diminished. I may not have a legal duty to take from my property and give it to the community, but if I don’t, there’s something missing within me. And if that is true during times of plenty,—how much more so is it true in difficult economic times.

This isn't obvious. It needs to be learned. It had to be learned by the Israelites themselves. Remember that incident, way back in Exodus, Chapter 2: Moses comes upon two Israelites fighting. He tries to break it up and they turn on him:

“Who do you think you are?” one of them says to him. “Are you going to kill me like you killed the Egyptian?” (2:14) Not a very civic-minded fellow!

As the old Hasidic saying puts it, Moses didn't just have to take the Israelites out of the heart of Egypt; he had to take Egypt out of the heart of the Israelites.

How do you teach that? How do you teach people to volunteer, to offer contributions? To act for the sake of the greater good? I can't think of any way other than by personal example. The irony about acting selflessly for the greater good is that drawing attention to it diminishes its value. It's better just to do it, and to trust that its lessons will be learned.

That spirit of volunteerism is alive in our world today. Interestingly, I found that Bialik poem “To the Volunteers” on the Internet, on a webpage on the bottom of which was written, “This page is a part of the Ben Yehudah Project, which exists thanks to the support of volunteers.” That project is putting the complete works of Hebrew authors like Bialik, who died more than 70 years ago (and whose work is therefore no longer subject to copyright restrictions), up on the Net for all to see.

But this is just one example. There are tremendous needs out there. There are plenty of opportunities for volunteer involvement. We have an active and an engaged social action committee that is gearing up for a year of heightened activity next year—the year in which our focus will be G'milut hasadim—acts of loving kindness. If you're interested, I urge you to get involved. If you're not interested, I urge you to get interested. (Obviously, you can't tell someone how to feel. But you can suggest why it's so worthwhile to act in a certain way.)

Historically, to be a Jew has always meant more than attending to one's spiritual needs—or any other personal needs. A synagogue has always been more than a social club; and Judaism more than a hobby or a game. We are part of a people which long preceded us and which we hope will long survive us. And it's more than one big happy—or, at times, unhappy—family. It is a people—a group of men, women and children united in pursuit of shared objectives, united by shared

values. Ours is a religious civilization, one that points toward redeeming the entire world. We are here not to perpetuate ourselves just for the sake of perpetuating ourselves, but to fulfill our responsibilities as Jews.

The lesson of Parashat Terumah, it seems to me, is that to be a Jew isn't just to do the right thing: it's to have a willing heart. It's to want to do the right thing not because "doing good is doing well"—not because doing so will rebound to your advantage, but because doing the right thing without any expectation of a reward or recognition is, quite simply, the right thing to do.

Inevitably, as Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev teaches us, when we do so, when we bring a terumah, an elevation offering, it isn't just the offering, and it isn't just the community, but it is we ourselves who are thereby elevated. May we elevate our possessions—and elevate ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom.