

Terumah 2007: UJC Super Sunday

Traditionally, in years past, this was the Shabbat when individuals – both lay and professional would fan out across our community to speak about the work of UJA Federation. That's because this coming Sunday is what is known as "Super Sunday".

Having chaired Super Sunday a number of years ago, I know a thing or two about the event. In fact this year, we are well represented, as it is co-chaired by B'nai Tzedek members Marcy Cohen, Helane Goldstein, Nancy Duber, and Les & Lori Ulanow.

Super Sunday is the day when volunteers come together in one central location to make calls to Jewish households throughout our community to ask people to contribute to the annual campaign of Federation. The idea for a one day telethon originated here in the Washington Jewish community, and is now replicated in other cities across the country.

On some shabbatot the attempt to find a connection to the week's Torah portion might be somewhat forced. But this year, it is not, and the relationship of the torah reading to the concept of giving is organic. The parasha is called, "Terumah", which in modern Hebrew means "contribution." It is the first of several sidrot describing the process of building the Tabernacle in the wilderness of Sinai. It opens with the words "*vayekechu lee terumah*". You shall take a contribution for me....

More about the meaning of these words later.

Suffice it to say, this is an appropriate time to reflect upon the concept of giving and of community.

One of the hallmarks of the Jewish people is our dedication to the notion that we have an obligation to give tzedekah. Tzedekah, which comes from the root word, Tzedek, differs from charity. Tzedek means justice and righteousness, and therefore is not an option. It is a mandate and a moral imperative which calls upon us to help the poor and the needy, but also demands that we support the institutions in our community. Extensive laws were developed in the Talmud to implement the principles of how we go about creating a fair and just society. At the root of the system and our way of life is the recognition that life is not lived alone.

In contemporary America an emphasis is placed upon fulfilling the needs of the individual, and of the pursuit of personal happiness. Judaism has a different approach. Life is not just about our own personal satisfaction, or acquiring material goods, but about being a part of a community, and supporting its work. As a result, in our tradition, the community can place demands and claims upon us.

This attitude is the basis of much of Jewish humor. Take for example the classic story of the beggar who is used to receiving a few kopeks every Friday from a particular merchant. One day the merchant passes him by, he gives him just one kopek, far less than the usual amount. The beggar looks at the man, and asks, what happened?

Right then and there, we can freeze frame the joke, and it is precious. It shows that the two, the wealthy man and the bum have a relationship. Moreover, the fact that the poor guy would question his allotment is a powerful demonstration of another important Jewish trait, chutzpah.

Back to the scenario and our story. So the rich merchant, somewhat embarrassed apologetically tells the beggar, “Sorry, that’s all I can give you. I didn’t have a good week.”

And immediately the beggar responds, “Nu? Just because you had a bad week, I should suffer?!”

There are numerous stories which are similar and only the punch-line is different. Such as the merchant who explains to the beggar he had to cutback what he was giving since it was his wife’s birthday and he bought her some expensive jewelry. To which the beggar indignantly responds, “With my money, you buy *her* presents?!”

All of these wonderful Jewish jokes have meaning and can resonate only among a people who understand that we are connected to each other, and that there is an obligation to care for the needy. Part of that understanding comes from the recognition that all that we have is but lent to us by God, that ultimately, God is the source of all wealth and goodness. Consequently, the question that each of us must consider then is how do we use our God-given resources. Do we only spend on ourselves, or do we use what we have to also help others, to ameliorate the conditions of all, and to work to ensure the security and well-being of our community and the institutions that provide for the needs of our people.

What people often do not realize about Federation is how many times it offers us the opportunity to touch others, and to extend our reach. Locally, Federation dollars support a number of agencies, all of whom do important work on our behalf. Everything from providing meals and transportation for the elderly through the Jewish Council for the Aging, Hebrew Home and other organizations, to its support of dynamic programs to reach our young people and keep them connected through its support of Hillel, youth groups, the JCC, Jewish camps and other activities. Our educational agenda is supported by grants to local synagogues and the work done by the Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning. When tragedy struck our own congregation last month, the Jewish Social Service Agency was there immediately to offer workshops, staff members and support, as they do in countless other instances.

If this was all that a contribution to Federation did, we could say, dayenu: it would be enough.

But in addition to all that is done in our local community, a considerable number of national Jewish agencies are also supported by the contributions we make to our local Federation. Some of these organizations deal with fighting anti-Semitism and all forms

of racism and discrimination, and some are devoted to representing us in inter-faith programs, while others care for the needy. And again, we could say, dayenu if that was all it did.

But there is also the unbelievable work done to support Jews around the world through the Joint Distribution Committee. I have seen indigent Jews in Eastern Europe who receive a stipend, or who go to a Jewish community center to receive a hot meal so they can live out their lives with a sense of dignity. I have also witnessed the renaissance of Jewish life in communities the Nazis sought to destroy where young children come to a Jewish nursery school to reconnect with their Jewish heritage, or go to summer camps and are instilled with a sense of pride. All of this support for Jews and Jewish life is made possible by the donations the American Jewish community makes to Federations around the nation.

And by the way, don't think that our Jewish agencies work only on behalf of Jews. When natural disaster strikes, or aid is needed in underdeveloped communities, we are there, through the apparatus we already have in place. Precisely because we are such a well-organized community, we are often turned to for rapid response to help in critical times. We are quick to offer assistance. I recall a number of years ago during a drought in Africa, the Jewish community in America sent money so that Israeli relief agencies could offer much needed food and medical care. A sign outside a big makeshift tent, had a Jewish star on it and bore the simple words, "From Israel, with love."

And finally, let us not forget the important and essential work on behalf of our fellow Jews in Israel. We help to supplement what the government of Israel does in the realm of education, assisting immigrants, helping people find jobs, and many other aspects of necessary social services.

The work we do is an amazing story. The things we do as a people is one of the most inspiring chapters in the history, not just of the Jewish people, but of the human race. And all you have to do to be a part of it is to participate in the annual Federation campaign, by either saying yes when you are called, or even better, by coming tomorrow to the JCC between 9 – 3 and helping to make calls. And if you are not called, and are not on the list, be sure you call the Federation on Monday to make a donation.

As I said at the outset, the Torah portion opens with the words "*Vayekhu lee terumah.*" Terumah literally means to lift up, to elevate, which teaches that when one gives it elevates the donor to a higher spiritual level. For as the commentary Ma'adanei Melech commented, "This captures the very essence of the Torah, giving tzedekah, for it is a sign of the level of compassion in an individual. Having an open and generous hand to help others is the very foundation of the teachings of the Torah."