

Terumah, 5781  
Rabbi Zev Wiener

No less significant than the majesty of the completed Mishkan is the process which led to its construction. As the title of Parashat Terumah -- *donated portion* -- reminds us, it is not coincidental or inconsequential that the construction of the Mishkan is predicated upon acts of voluntary giving. While sacrifices and other Mitzvot can indeed be mandated compulsorily, the construction of the Mishkan as a house for the Divine Presence demands pure selflessness. Indeed, the Mishkan was not only a physical building that housed the Divine Presence, but also a vehicle that allowed for the expression of the Divine Presence that inherently exists within each individual person. As the Alshich classically observed:

"ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם -- בתוכו לא נאמר אלא בתוכם, בתוך כל אחד ואחד מישראל"

*"And they shall make for me a sanctuary, and I shall dwell in them" -- [the Torah] does not say [that the Divine Presence will rest] 'in it,' but rather 'in them' -- that is, within each and every member of Israel*

The symbolism of the act of giving in the construction of the Mishkan teaches a fundamental spiritual truth. Nothing reveals the Divine Presence within a person more than selfless love. When we give of ourselves fully, we banish our false ego, connect with our Divine soul, and most clearly resemble G-d, who is the ultimate Giver.

While isolated external acts of giving may not always be difficult, developing the consistent inner disposition of what the Parasha calls a "גדיב לב," -- *a generous heart*, may prove more formidable. Indeed, the innate human temptation to succumb to selfishness, craving, and gratification is constant and strong. Without vigilance, one can rapidly drift into an ego-driven state at any moment, that focuses on "me"-ness: grabbing, amassing, and indulging. As the Ramban teaches (Vayikra 19), even when we live a life that superficially includes other noble Torah practices such as studying Daf Yomi or attending Shul, it is possible to remain fundamentally selfish and hedonistic. While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with gourmet kosher restaurants or five-star kosher vacations, if they are enjoyed from a place of entitlement, craving, and ego, they undermine the entire goal of Torah. We will never attain a state of "ושכנתי בתוכם" if we spend years in day school memorizing academic Chumash and Talmud, but failing to simultaneously work on our underlying inner disposition, getting "me" out of the way to make room for "Him."

When we live focused on ourselves, we pay a heavy price. Devoid of a genuine awareness of G-d's indwelling presence, we may become plagued by a constant sense of unease and discomfort, since the selfish ego always wants more. No house, no car, and no marriage partner can ever be good enough, because we are trying to fill a bottomless pit. We want it all, and our fixation on ourselves leaves us no rest. I have long worried that as the Modern Orthodox community -- in step with the world at large -- has become increasingly pampered without regular counterbalancing contemplation and reflection, our expectations and those of our children have skyrocketed, and the focus on the "me" has expanded. We walk a very fine line in gratefully enjoying our pleasures and conveniences while not succumbing to entitlement, selfishness, and all the miseries that ensue.

Interestingly, I have observed that many working Americans seem to find Sundays to be a more challenging day emotionally than other days of the week. While there are likely multiple valid explanations, it seems that for some people, the dissatisfaction ironically comes from the fact that Sundays are solely about themselves. They do better on all other days, where they have structure and obligations to be somewhere at a certain time, producing something for someone else, not stuck in their own head. But on Sundays, their focus is just themselves. They are free to do whatever they'd like; it's a day when they are "supposed" to be happy; and this becomes inherently unsatisfying, as they feel plagued by feelings that they could be spending the day doing something more pleasurable and more exciting, yet they are not. Indeed, we humans generally do not do well when we are primarily focused on making ourselves happy.

But when we live as selfless givers, it's not about ourselves. Our interest lies not in how much more pleasure *we* could be attaining or how much of a better life *we* could be living, but rather, our attention is directed outwards, consistently seeking to give to others and worrying about their well-being. Any acts of taking that we do are performed with the intention of being able to continue to be able to give more fully in the future. This external focus ironically elevates our own quality of life, not by means of a shallow distraction from our own problems, but by virtue of the fact that we are living in natural sync with our Divine soul, which always seeks to give. Inasmuch as the Divine Presence is not bound by physical space, we are said to "house" or "be close to" the Divine Presence when we resemble the Divine attributes, and there is no more natural or fulfilling state for us than this.

It is noteworthy that Purim is the ultimate holiday of selflessness. We wear masks to de-emphasize ourselves. We must fulfill no less than two specific commandments to give to others: משלוח מנות and מתנות לאביונים. Mordechai tells Esther that she must not think of herself, but rather of the welfare of the nation. Even G-d Himself performs the ultimate act of selflessness, hiding His name throughout the entire Megillah, as if to say it is not about Him. It is precisely this character of selflessness that contributes to making Purim such a holy day, one which, unlike other holy days, will never cease to be celebrated forever. And it is in this spirit that the Rambam rules (Megillah 2:17):

מוטב להרבות במתנות אביונים מלהרבות בסעודתו ובשלוח מנות לרעיו. שאין. שם שמחה גדולה ומפארה אלא לשמח לב עניים ויתומים ואלמנות וגרים שהמשמח לב האומללים האלו דומה לשכינה שנאמר להחיות רוח שפלים ולהחיות לב נדכאים."

*It is preferable [on Purim] for one to spend abundant funds to support the poor as opposed to spending abundantly for one's Purim feast or Mishloach Manot. For there is no greater and more glorified joy than to gladden the hearts of paupers, orphans, widows, and converts. **For one who brings joy to the hearts of these downtrodden individuals resembles the Divine Presence, as it is written, 'to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the hearts of the broken.'***

Nothing resembles, and thereby houses, the Divine Presence more than our ability to practice selflessness through genuine giving -- especially to those who cannot pay us back. Purim comes to conclude a year which has seen loss and devastation for so many, reminding us that there is no greater holiness or joy than we put ourselves aside and help those who need us. This Purim, whether physically or virtually, let us all make an extra effort to reveal a little more of the Divine Presence by giving of ourselves to all of our brothers and sisters.