

## The Give and Take of Terumah

**Rabbi Kim Harris**

When I was growing up, my mama would often say to me, “Kimbo, run take these cucumbers, squash, beans... whatever she had just picked from the garden... to Mrs. Webb,” and I would walk over to our next-door neighbor’s house to give her the produce. In the South the words “take” and “give” are basically synonyms. Aren’t they opposites, though? Doesn’t “take” imply removing something from another’s possession or from another’s hand, or to steal something? In today’s Torah portion, the words “take” and “give” are central to the theme of the narrative and to the name of the parashah.

When the parashah opens, Moshe is up on Mount Sinai receiving more instructions from God, specifically instructions on building the *Mishkan*, often translated as “the tabernacle.” The mishkan was basically a portable temple that could be erected and broken down easily as the Israelites trekked through the wilderness. The instructions are meticulously detailed, and Moshe must have had an incredible memory to have recalled all this information to relay to the Israelites. In addition to instructions for constructing the actual structure, there are descriptions of what is to be placed inside: the menorah, the altar for sacrifices, the Ark, and the Holy of Holies.

Today I read the opening verses of the portion:

וַיִּדְבֹר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל וִיקַחוּ-לִי תְרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר  
יִדְבְּנוּ לְבֹו תִקְחוּ אֶת-תְּרוּמָתִי:

Adonai spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to B'nei Yisrael, the Children of Israel, and have them take for Me a *terumah*-offering. From every person whose heart impels them to be generous shall you take my *terumah*-offering.

So, what's happening here? Adonai and Moshe are discussing (dun dun dun) fundraising ...a capital campaign... so to have everything needed to build and furnish the Mishkan. Now these offerings are not dues or taxes, but offerings of the heart – free-will offerings. This phrasing of the offering as a *terumah* is intentional. God realizes that this endeavor is going to be a hard sell. The Israelites are just weeks out from being slaves, and now they're being asked to donate things. Using the word “take” is deliberate also.

Rashi, one of our most respected commentators, says that the *terumah* is a special type of offering that is to be “set apart.” So, each individual voluntarily “takes” the offering from their own possessions, allocating it for a sacred purpose.

This Yiddish folktale gives another “take” on the difference between “giving” and “taking”:

“Yankel the Cheapskate” would not give money to anyone, for any reason. It didn’t matter how important the cause was. No one could crack him. He just wouldn’t contribute. One day, Yankel was crossing the river in a small boat. Suddenly, a huge storm broke out, and his boat capsized. Luckily, another boat approached. The sailor called out to him: “Give me your hand. Give me your hand.”

Yankel could barely hear him over the strong winds and the roaring waves. He heard only one word, over and over: “Give, Give...”

And good old Yankel couldn’t help himself. He yelled back: “No. I don’t give. I don’t give.”

Again: “Yankel, give me your hand! Give me your hand.” And again, Yankel screamed: “Never. I don’t give.”

Finally, in desperation, the rescuer yelled: “Yankel, take my hand.” And Yankel said: “Oh, take? Sure.”

So, we have a *terumah*, an offering to be donated as each person is moved to give, but we also have *tz’dakah*, defined as righteous giving, a *mitzvah*, a commandment. Our tradition teaches us that giving is “the opportunity to help others” – a privilege that benefits us as much as the ones to whom we are giving.

So, in taking we are giving, and in giving we are taking. Every time we give, we are taking back happiness and fulfillment. What else was bestowed upon the Israelites as a result of their taking a *terumah*? One thing is mentioned here:

וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם:

And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.

Remember, in the accounts of the giving of the Law, the mountain was smoking, the sounds were so loud that the people could see them, and the voice of God terrified the people. They told Moses, “You speak to God and then tell us what was said!” So, here in the mishkan, God can dwell among the people, which sounds like a benefit both for the Israelites and for God.

What else did the Israelites take from their giving? In the instructions for constructing the mishkan, God always says let **them** build, **they** shall make, etc. What does this imply? ... Everyone has a buy-in and everyone is allowed to help and to work on the various tasks according to their skill. There was 100 percent participation. Imagine the joy of seeing their work come to fruition. That doesn’t happen for several more Torah portions, but eventually they are able to behold the fruits of their labor.

I imagine it feeling like I do after a Habitat for Humanity build. We work with partners to perform various tasks like hammering, sawing, schlepping, painting, and installing, which though certainly not in my wheelhouse, are fun to learn and do.

At the end of the day, red-faced, sweaty, and smiling, we realize all we accomplished, and the Israelites, though surely exhausted, found joy in this work since their labor would produce a beautiful structure in honor of God that they could enjoy, unlike making bricks for Pharaoh day in and day out and receiving nothing but harsh treatment.

How does this Parashat Terumah (the Torah portion of Terumah) relate to us? It has arrived in the Torah reading cycle just as we are kicking off OUR capital campaign. Like the building of the mishkan, we are, like God, asking *kol ish asher lidvenu libo* – each person whose heart is compelling them to be generous.

As in the construction of the mishkan, each B’nai Chaimite can give as they wish. Although large donations are certainly helpful, every donation is important, and every single one of us may participate in this holy work for the reason that feels most compelling: for the future of our congregation, for the beauty and security of our building, and for the glory of God.

*V'asu li Mikdash b'shachanti b'tocham.*

Let us create a holy place so that we may dwell among one another and so that God may dwell among us.