

The Caring Heart: Parashat Terumah

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Within the Jewish Community, fundraising is ubiquitous and never-ending. We raise money for a countless number of worthy projects: important causes, buildings which need to be built, people who need to be helped. This week, on Sunday, February 9, our community hosts our annual Super Sunday fundraising drive on behalf of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, the largest and, perhaps most important fundraising effort in our community, as we come together to support so many who need our help. Indeed, fundraising remains a central feature and constant effort in our community to this day.

But fundraising is more than just a constant feature of Jewish life. Few realize that the practice of raising needed funds is a practice embedded in our tradition at the very earliest and most fundamental layers of Jewish history, beginning with this week's *parasha*. *Parashat Terumah*, this week, follows some of the most important and monumental events experienced by our ancestors. To understand the deeper meaning of our *parasha*, therefore, we must understand it in the context of what has just preceded it.

Following the escape from Egypt (*Parashat Bo*), our ancestors were transformed from slaves into free people. As they crossed the parted waters of the Sea of Reeds (*Parashat Beshalach*) they left behind the experience of persecution and oppression. But freedom comes with responsibility and so, once freed from slavery, the children of Israel made their way to Sinai. At Sinai (*Parashat Yitro*), the Children of Israel learn a crucial lesson: freedom requires law. The Ten Commandments were given in order to lay down the guiding principles for a moral and just nation. Following the experience of Sinai, the Torah provides a lengthy list of laws, civil laws, aimed, again at creating within our nation the highest standards of justice (*Parashat Mishpatim*). And, it is on the heels of these laws that we reach *Parashat Terumah*.

Parashat Terumah begins with an unexpected request (Ex. 25:2 ff). God instructs Moses to ask the people to bring gifts to help build the *Mishkan*, the holy structure which will carry the tablets which Moses brought down from Sinai. What is curious, to say the least, about this passage is the nature of the request. The people are not told what to bring or how much to bring. They are simply informed that everyone with a willing heart, everyone who is moved to do so, can bring gifts. Bring whatever you would like in order to help with this building project: gold, silver, copper, linen, wood. And bring as much or as little as you like.

There are three features of this passage which I find to be astounding:

1. First, the nature of the request: Give if you are so moved. Give if you have a willing heart and don't give if you don't give in that spirit.
2. Second, it does not seem to matter which item you bring. Gold, linen or wood all fulfill the request.
3. This is a request, not a command. These former slaves are not commanded to give. They are asked.

This was how the first fundraising campaign, quite a successful campaign, I might add, in Jewish History was run. And this campaign may have something to teach us about fundraising but it certainly has something to teach us about what it means to be part of the Jewish People.

The request to contribute required that each person search their heart. The gift was to be given from a *Nadiv Lev*, a willing heart, a wanting heart, a generous heart. And it is the creation of a willing heart which, I believe, is the purpose of everything which has occurred until this point. This request constitutes a test: have the events of the past, the laws we have given, accomplished what we had hoped? Being freed from slavery, receiving the Law at Sinai, adhering to the civil laws and moral expectations articulated earlier, were all parts of the preface to this moment, the lessons which were being taught to make a larger point. The laws, you see, were never intended to be an end. Strict observance was intended to lead to something more. Following the laws, adhering to commandments was not only a way to establish a moral society. It was a process by which one developed a *Nadiv Lev*, a giving heart.

In order to create that inner quality, that sense of generosity, one needed to remove from within the barriers which impeded that sort of willingness and generosity. Those barriers are "The Self," one's ego, one's desire to do in order simply to fulfill a requirement, to be exempted from responsibility, to be regarded as compliant. To give with a giving heart means to give not in order to receive recognition, plaques or awards, not to give in order to be exempted. It is the giving which is motivated by a desire to help, to share whatever one has to share. It is the giving which is requested of a people whose hallmark will be generosity and giving for its own sake. And how do I know this? That, it seems to me, is the deeper message of our verse.

The gift requested from the giving heart was called a *Terumah*, generally translated as a donation or gift. But the root of the word (*Leharim*) means "to lift up." A *Terumah* is the gift one gives and, in the process of giving, one is lifted up, raised, spiritually elevated. When one gives from a generous heart, what elevates that person is not the accolades and kudos received from those around, but the elevation which comes from placing aside one's ego, one's desire for recognition. One who gives in that spirit has given with a giving heart. And through that gift, one is raised up spiritually. One Chasidic commentator explains it in this way:

When we open our hearts with compassion and generosity, when we liberate ourselves from the enslavement of ego/self-centeredness, then we, and those with whom we interact, are elevated.

But there is something else embedded in this project. This project was the first test of a new nation. Could law be understood as a means to a higher end? The goal of this people will be found not simply in compliance but in compassion and kindness. A few verses later (v. 7) this lesson is confirmed:

Make me a sanctuary (*Mikdash*) that I might dwell among **them**.

When we build with a giving heart, when we donate not for the purpose of self-aggrandizement or honor but for the sake of building something holy (*kadosh*), the gift is not only one which lifts us (*Terumah*) but one which connects us to God: Those who give with a generous heart shall know that I am there, in **them**, with **them**.

The purpose of Judaism is to help its adherents accomplish at least three goals.

1. To create a community united by the unique features which define us as a People.
2. To establish a relationship with God.
3. To provide for us a way of life in which our most cherished values are concretized through the actions we perform.

The building of the Mishkan in the desert did all of these things.

1. The Mishkan served as a central meeting place for the Children of Israel in the desert.
2. It provided for our ancestors a place to encounter God's presence.
3. It was a structure at which the values of thanksgiving, praise and forgiveness could be expressed.

But Judaism is more. Judaism is a religion which permeates our inner lives, our spiritual lives. Beyond adherence to law, therefore, one of the most fundamental teachings of the Torah reminds us that compliance is not an end in itself. The "end" is to remove the ego from our giving, to remove the self as a source of motivation, to be lifted spiritually as we give. And then, if we can do that, a miracle can happen. When we remove the self from the equation, we make room for God. And, in those hearts, God tells us, "Ve Shachanti Betochem," - I shall reside in them.