Giving and Taking: Thoughts on Parashat Terumah, February 20, 2010

View PDF

A kabbalistic teaching has it that we come closer to God through the power of giving--giving love, charity, kindness. A truly religious person is characterized by an overwhelming desire to share with others, to act selflessly with purity of heart.

On the other hand, we become more distant from God through the power of taking--trying to amass as much as possible for ourselves--more material goods, more honor, more egotistical satisfaction. We cannot exist without the power of taking, since we must fulfill our basic material needs. But when we exert this power excessively, we drift further and further from God.

We all know individuals who are characterized by the power of giving. These are loving people who can be trusted, who are generous, compassionate and loyal. When we meet such individuals, we can sense the image of God in them. They genuinely want to help, to share, to be of service, to contribute. They are humble, and ask for nothing in return for their kindness.

We all also know individuals who are selfish and self-serving. They may act friendly and smile broadly, but we sense that their friendship is as counterfeit as their smile. They may pretend to be loyal and giving--but they are simply interested in advancing themselves. They try to take credit for work performed by others. They are seldom there when work has to be done, but are always there for photo-ops. They ingratiate themselves with those in power, and calculate how they can take the most for themselves while giving the least of themselves. They pass themselves off as generous and kind, but they are only putting on an act. Their real goal is to take, not to give. Such people may fool some of the people some of the time, and even most of the people most of the time: but they never fool God.

This week's Torah portion begins with God's commandment to Moses to call on the Israelites to contribute to the construction of the sanctuary (Mishkan). God specifies that He only wants contributions from those with generous hearts. He doesn't want contributions from those who are stingy; or who give in order to advance their own reputations and honor; or who give reluctantly or grudgingly. The Israelites were to build a sanctuary to the Lord--but it had to be constructed

with "the power of giving", with selflessness and generosity of spirit. The house of God must be built with the finest, most idealistic human qualities.

The aspiration of a truly religious person must be to develop the power of giving; to be genuine, honest and kind. If we are to make our contributions to God's sanctuary--and to society--we must do so with purity of heart, selflessness and humililty.

***Please share the Angel for Shabbat column with family and friends. Please visit our website at www.jewishideas.org, and support the work of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Angel for Shabbat