Not Somebody Else, Just Us: Thoughts on Parashat Terumah

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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Terumah

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Over the years, I have been deeply and favorably impressed by individuals who have come forward with suggestions for the betterment of our synagogue, our Institute, our community. These individuals not only offered constructive advice, but they volunteered to give time and money to implement their suggestions. Their ideas and suggestions emerged from their minds, hearts and souls; they were committed to improve things and to be part of the constructive work that needed to be done.

Over the years, I have been deeply and unfavorably impressed by other individuals who have come forward with suggestions for the betterment of our synagogue, our Institute, our community. These individuals did not volunteer to give time and money to implement their suggestions. On the contrary, they expected “the rabbi” or “the synagogue” or “the community” or “the rabbinate” to expend time and money—however much—without their having to do anything more than make suggestions. Even worse, when their suggestions were not and could not be implemented, they expressed frustration and anger.

Jewish communities are always involved in serious projects—providing religious services, erecting or repairing buildings, improving schools, implementing new programs, providing for the needy etc. Everything costs time and money. Not every idea or suggestion is good; not every project is wise. People can differ widely on the priorities list of things to be done. However, we work together and come to consensus; and then we proceed. For the Jewish community to achieve worthy goals, each individual needs to feel a personal stake, and needs to help to the extent of one’s means and abilities. No one of us can do everything; but not one of us should do nothing.

In this week's Torah portion, we read of the contributions that were to be made for the building of the Mishkan, the holy sanctuary in the wilderness. People were asked to contribute according to the generosity of their hearts. The Torah's description includes two factors: 1) contributing; 2) a generous heart. If one contributes reluctantly or begrudgingly, there is a deficiency in the quality of the gift. If one shows generosity of heart—but doesn't actually contribute according to one's means—this is an even greater deficiency. A proper gift entails the right quality—generosity of heart—and the actual contribution. Good-heartedness and good intentions that are not accompanied by actual giving—are vacuous. Giving without good-heartedness is not the ideal.

My father-in-law, Rabbi Paul E. Schuchalter, of blessed memory, once ran an "obituary" in his synagogue bulletin. The "obituary" lamented the passing of Somebody Else. It praised Mr. Else as the most popular person in the synagogue. Whenever there was a fund drive, everyone immediately turned to Somebody Else. Whenever volunteers were needed, people recommended Somebody Else. Whenever congregants were called upon to attend minyan or adult education classes, they knew they could always rely on Somebody Else. The "obituary" concluded with the sad observation that with the passing of Somebody Else, members would no longer be able to rely on his readiness to participate in the life of the congregation. It was now up to all members of the Congregation to no longer depend on Somebody Else, but to depend on themselves.

In the late 1880s, Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Ottolenghi was an important educator in Salonika. He offered a homiletic interpretation of the Mishnah that states: "On the eve of the Sabbath near to dusk, a man must say three things in his home: Have you taken the tithe? Have you prepared the Eruv? Light the Sabbath lamp."

He explained this passage as follows: As a person comes near the time of death (eve of the Sabbath near to dusk), one needs to review one's life. Did he/she give tithes i.e. did he/she contribute appropriately to needy people and charitable causes? Did he/she prepare the Eruv i.e. did the person serve as an Areiv—a guarantor—for the wellbeing of his fellow human beings? Did the person take responsibility and feel a personal stake in the lives of others? If the person can answer yes to these questions—i.e. he/she did contribute appropriately and he/she was invested personally in the wellbeing of others and the community—then "light the Sabbath lamp"—one can present his/her soul before the Almighty with illumination and brightness.

Rabbi Ottolenghi stressed the need for contributing, and for contributing with a generous and sincere heart. Both elements are essential to a proper religious

person.

We cannot rely on Somebody Else, on “the rabbis”, on “the community” on “the synagogue” to do what needs to be done. Vacuous complaints and empty demands achieve nothing.

Each of us has a role to play. Each can give of our talents and resources to the best of our ability. Each can take personal responsibility and realize that Somebody Else isn’t available to do the work that needs to be done.

Angel for Shabbat