Heart-felt Generosity: Thoughts for Parashat Terumah

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“And the Lord spoke to Moses saying: Speak to the children of Israel that they take for Me an offering; of every person whose heart inclines to give, you shall take My offering” (Shemot 25:1-2).

The Israelites were invited to contribute to the building of the Mishkan, each according to the generosity of one’s heart. The Torah lists things to be donated: gold, silver and brass; various dyes; fine linen and goat’s hair; ram skins and seal skins; acacia wood; oil; spices; precious stones for the ephod and breastplate.

The list of donations is often interpreted to mean that the rich gave precious metals, while the others gave less valuable—but very important—items. Thus, everyone who wished to contribute could find a comfortable level of participation.

Yet, we must remember that the commandment to construct the Mishkan was given to Israelites while they were in the wilderness. They were being fed by mannah. Their clothes did not wear out. They had no businesses, no investments, no economic life to speak of. In such a setting, everyone was pretty much equal. Even if some managed to carry more things out of Egypt, what advantage did they enjoy? What good did a pile of gold do in a setting where nothing was bought and nothing was for sale, where everyone lived in temporary huts?

By specifying that gifts should only be taken from those with generous hearts, the Torah implies that some Israelites might not be generous. Even though they had no use for their gold and silver, they wanted to hoard it anyway. They took satisfaction in possession.

When reading the list of things to be donated, we might tend to think that the most valuable things were listed first (gold, silver, brass) and the less valuable things were listed afterward. But it would seem that this is not at all the case.

It would have entailed little sacrifice to donate precious metals. They had no real value in the context of life in the wilderness. These items were easily accessible

and required little effort to hand them over. The donor would have felt no genuine loss.

To donate dyes, though, required some work. One had to find the shell-fish or insects from which these dyes were made. One had to mix the ingredients with great care, to be sure to get just the right color. Making dyes requires patience and skill.

To donate linen, goat's hair, ram skins and seal skins—this required even more effort. The threads needed to be cleaned and woven in a time-consuming and arduous process. How difficult it must have been to capture rams and seals (probably meaning badgers), slaughtering them, skinning them, and then preparing the skins for use in the Mishkan.

To donate acacia wood—there must have been acacia trees in the wilderness, but it would have taken time to locate them, to chop them down, to remove the bark, to cut the trees into usable pieces of lumber.

To donate oil and spices—making olive oil requires skill, time, effort. Finding spices in the wilderness could not have been a simple task.

To donate the precious stones—these were rare items; it would have taken considerable time to search, dig, and work in the hot sun until these stones were actually found.

In calling on the Israelites to contribute to the building of the Mishkan, the Almighty specified that the gifts should be heart-felt. In delineating the types of gifts, the Almighty indicated various levels of sincere generosity.

Some donated gold, silver and brass. This is nice; but it actually reflected a tepid attitude. People were giving things they didn't really need.

Others donated their time, efforts and skills. They made dyes, tanned skins, chopped trees, pressed oil. They searched for spices and rare precious stones. These gifts represent deeper levels of heart-felt giving. The donors of these things had to demonstrate personal commitment and self-sacrifice.

The underlying message of the "Terumah" offering: the more you are genuinely committed to participate in the project, the more time and effort you will expend. The value of your heart-felt gift is not calculated in dollars, but in the amount of loving devotion you put into your donation.

Applying this message to our own times, there are no shortage of worthy causes and needy individuals who need our help. While we cannot solve all problems, we can focus on providing for those institutions and individuals that mean most to us.

There are those whose desire to hoard their own assets is greater than their desire to help others. They do not contribute, or contribute as little as possible.

There are others who contribute by writing a quick check or giving a token handout.

There are others who are sincerely generous, and who give above and beyond what could be expected of them. They see their contribution as an investment in creating a better world.

There are yet others who dedicate enormous time, skill, and effort to addressing the needs that they wish to alleviate. They not only give of their personal resources, but they volunteer their time and talent.

If we understand the challenge before us and if we genuinely wish to make our contribution, we will undertake our task lovingly, generously and with a full heart.

“And they will make for Me a Mishkan, and I will dwell within them.”

Angel for Shabbat