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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Terumah

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart is so moved” (Shemot 25:2).

For the construction of the Mishkan, Moses was to collect donations on a voluntary basis from those who gave with full heart. Generous people would understand that it was a privilege to participate in the building of the sanctuary. Their hearts would be moved to do the right thing. No coercion was necessary.

But what about those whose hearts did not move them to contribute? Were they to be excluded from the services of the Mishkan? No, they would enjoy the benefits of the sanctuary even if they did not share in the expenses of constructing it. So did the non-givers win?

Although they might seem to have come out ahead financially, in fact they lost a great deal more than they gained. They lost the mitzvah of sharing in a sacred communal undertaking. They lost the respect of others who participated with full hearts. They lost personal dignity.

In kabbalistic thought, it is taught that when people take or receive something that they did not earn, they are guilty of eating "the bread of shame.” We avoid the “bread of shame” when we strive to give commensurate with what we receive. This isn’t only a matter of financial outlays; we also “repay” others with kindness, thoughtfulness, even a simple thank you.

This lesson applies to many aspects of life. We should not simply be "takers" who receive goods and services from others. We also should be "givers" who do our share to repay the many benefits we enjoy.

This is true on a personal level. We should not exploit the kindness of friends and acquaintances but should return their kindnesses gladly and generously. This is true on a communal level. We should not expect synagogues and schools and other institutions to be there for us, but we should be members and supporters so as to carry our own weight to the best of our ability. This is true on the national and international level. We should not expect others to provide for us, without our willingness to provide for their needs as well.

Sometimes people think they come out ahead if they take something without having given anything in return. They think they have "beaten the system." Actually, such people humiliate themselves because they are eating "the bread of shame." They do not realize that taking something without giving back to the best of their ability is demeaning.

Good-hearted, thoughtful and generous people are the ones who sanctify life. They do not eat “the bread of shame.”