Are We Philanthropists?--Thoughts for Parashat Vayakhel

View PDF



Angel for Shabbat--Parashat Vayakhel

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Over the years, I've been involved in raising many millions of charity dollars—for my synagogue, the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, yeshivot, UJA-Federation, Israeli institutions etc. I've learned much about the nature of philanthropy and philanthropists.

I remember with great respect those special donors who contributed generously without even being asked. Some of these donors made huge contributions, others contributed generously within their own means. The common denominator was a recognition of responsibility, commitment, and a genuine desire to participate to the extent possible.

I also remember those who donated generously after being asked; those who donated minimally and reluctantly, those who didn't contribute at all. Fund-raising has its joys and frustrations!!

Rashi (on Shemot 35:27) cites a midrashic teaching about the donation pattern of the heads of the Israelite tribes. Moses had called on all the people to contribute to the building of the Mishkan sanctuary. The leaders decided not to contribute right away. Their plan was to wait until the campaign was completed and they would then donate to fill in what was still left to be collected. This would accomplish several things. First, it would demonstrate that the public couldn't accomplish the goal without the leaders' contributions. Second, it might cost them less if they waited until the end of the campaign rather than contributing right away.

But their plan backfired. The people were so generous that they completed the campaign without needing anything from the leaders. Not wanting to be left out, the leaders made later contributions. The Torah hints at the deficiency of the leaders' character by omitting the letter "yod" when referring to them as Nesi'im.

Real generosity manifests itself in wanting to participate early and to as great an extent as possible. While we can't contribute generously to every worthy cause, we can focus on those that are most aligned with our values and/or provide services that we and our community need.

Many years ago, a member of our congregation sent in a very large unsolicited donation. I thanked him for his generous gift and asked him if it was given for a specific purpose. He answered simply: "I had a good year financially and it is a privilege to be able to support the synagogue." I've been blessed to know others of this caliber, people who contributed full-heartedly to the extent of their financial

ability. They didn’t hesitate to invest their resources in causes and institutions that were important to them and to the community beyond.

Each of us can be a philanthropist on our own financial level if we give what we can without even being asked. Or if we are asked, we can respond early and enthusiastically. Together we can build a better, stronger community.