Budgets: The Human Component--Thoughts for Parashat Pekudei

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Pekudei

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The Israelites contributed generously toward the construction of the Mishkan sanctuary. Upon completion of the project, Moses gave an accounting as to how the donations were applied. Although no one could have questioned Moses's integrity, he wanted to make it absolutely clear that leaders are accountable for how contributions are spent.

The late Senator Everett Dirksen once quipped about the American budget: "A billion here, a billion there, and pretty soon you're talking real money." And that was in the 1960's. These days, we're talking about trillions of dollars…not merely billions.

We are so accustomed to hearing of projects that entail millions, billions and trillions of dollars, we sometimes forget that these dollars are "real money." Funds are allocated as though no human component is involved.

Moses set an example: public funds are not "anonymous." They are generated by actual people who have a right to a proper accounting of their outlays.

The Torah refers to money as "damim"—blood! Money represents human labor, time, and investment. It is not neutral. Each dollar represents a bit of our lives, the time and energy it took us to generate that dollar.

We learn of the government's allocation of several hundred million dollars to this project, billions to another project, and more than a trillion for yet another massive endeavor. While vast public expenditures are inevitable—and often necessary—we are presented with huge dollar amounts as if the money simply comes from the air. The numbers become disconnected from the actual human beings who are providing the dollars for the budgets.

As governments and organizations deal with the public's money, they are responsible for spending the money as wisely and fairly as possible. They are duty-bound to prevent wasteful use of funds. They need to realize that each dollar has a human component, that public funds represent the "damim" of all who pay into the system.

When allocating public funds, decisions must be made as to what is best and most needed by constituents. There will obviously be different budgetary opinions and calculations. Not every constituent will agree with every decision. Nevertheless, the process of allocating funds must be conducted with a keen sense of responsibility to the stake-holders. Dispensers of public funds need the wisdom to know how to apply resources properly. Cutting corners on important matters may well lead to increased wastefulness and damage in the future. The public is best served when long range planning is conducted calmly and carefully, taking into consideration positive and negative consequences of each decision.

Budgets are not simply a matter of neutral mathematical calculations. They represent the needs, concerns and aspirations of the human beings who have contributed their resources. Moses demonstrated the responsibility of giving proper accounting of public funds. He set a model for future generations…including our own.