

TIMELESS TORAH

PARSHAT TERUMAH - A Giving Home, A Giving life

The Power of Small Steps

Parshat Terumah is the first of four parshiyot that describe the building of the Mishkan as a home for Hashem's Presence. On the face of it, this project seems unattainably over ambitious. How are mere mortals able to contemplate creating a home for the Divine Presence? But, as the Chafetz Chaim (d. 1933) taught, the answer to this question underscores the most basic premise of our spiritual life. Citing a Midrash, he writes that Moshe Rabbeinu himself was perplexed by this request, but Hashem taught him not to measure himself on the same scale as the Divine. It is true that the most magnificent palace would not be sufficient to demonstrate the glory of Hashem, but we are expected to do and to give only what we are able: a small sanctuary, comprising less than fifty beams but constructed with devotion and commitment, was all that was necessary for our ancestors to merit the Divine Presence resting within them. Indeed, specifically after the majesty and grandeur of the Revelation at Har Sinai, the idea of living with Hashem is brought down to our level with specific instructions regarding how to build a physical structure that can house the Presence of Hashem. This has had eternal lessons ever since for the approach we have taken as a people in building synagogues and houses of prayer – it is not the grandeur of the structure that counts, but the depth of inspiration and commitment that exists within.

A Giving Nation

It is fascinating that the introduction to the undertaking of building the Mishkan focusses on the idea of ownership and giving.

It seems clear that the Torah is teaching that the foundational principle of building a spiritual home is developing an ability to give. In fact, the word *yidevenu* — they shall donate (25:2) — illustrates this concept in a remarkable way. While this word literally means 'they shall donate', the Kli Yakar (d.1619) connects it to a similarly pronounced word, meaning 'they will be concerned'. When people are asked to donate to a certain cause, no matter how worthwhile it may be, it is natural for them to react apprehensively. When discussing the building of the Mishkan, however, the Torah teaches us how to overcome these misgivings. Rashi explains how the opening few *pesukim* of the parshah allude to three separate donations: the half-shekel contribution towards the sockets that held the beams of the Mishkan, the half-shekel contribution to pay for the communal sacrifices and, thirdly, the donations towards the rest of the building of the Mishkan. Significantly, unlike the first two contributions, this last donation was not prescribed, and people were free to give what and how much they felt they could afford.

The message here, as the Kli Yakar presents it, is that we are being taught how to overcome the natural reluctance to part with what we have and to develop into a nation of givers. At first, we were commanded to contribute to the public amenities. No one was permitted to shirk this responsibility, and the half-shekel was procured from every member of the Jewish people. Critically, though, the amount requested was small and manageable. Only after they internalised the idea that giving is not



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

Wednesdays - 8.00-8.45pm | In-person at Kinloss

optional but essential were they asked for a donation of *yidevenu libo* — a free donation that stems from the realisation that giving to others is the only way we gain eternal ownership of our possessions.

The Ohr HaChaim (d. 1743) takes these ideas further, suggesting an explanation as to why the Avnei Shoham, the precious stones used for the Choshen, are mentioned only at the end of the list of requested donations despite being seemingly more valuable than the gold and silver mentioned at the beginning of the list. The Avnei Shoham were presented to the Mishkan by the Nesi'im, the Princes of the Twelve Tribes, who had announced that they would complete whatever was missing after everyone else had brought their contributions and indeed were thus given the opportunity to donate these stones. However, as magnanimous as their intentions may have been, they are criticised for not rushing to respond to the appeal. Their contributions are mentioned last because true givers push themselves forward to donate first, thereby inspiring others to follow their example.

Natural Generosity

Rabbi S R Hirsch (d.1888) sees the word *na-dav* — to donate — as closely related to the word *nataf* — to drip. This means that, ideally, donating to charitable causes should not be a process in which a person must force themselves to dig deeper into their pockets. Rather, it should be inculcated so deeply that it drips freely and naturally from within oneself. As such, giving does not have to be limited to the financial realm, but should be an attitude that governs our lifestyle in every respect.

A though-provoking observation from the Ramban beautifully illustrates this. The Ramban comments on the fact that, unlike the construction of the other vessels of the Mishkan, the instructions for the Aron are given in the plural: *v'asu* — and they should make (25:10) — rather than *v'asisa* — and you (singular) should make. The reason for this, he says, is that the Aron represented the Torah, and it was fitting that all of the Jewish people should be given an opportunity to take part in building it. Obviously, it would have been impossible for every individual to have physically joined in the work, but the Ramban describes three ways that they could all have been involved.

The first way was to donate. No matter how small their donation, everyone who wished to do so was able to contribute. Secondly, they supported Betzalel in his work, either with emotional backing or by helping with some of the technical aspects, and thirdly, they could simply demonstrate their motivation and desire to support the project.

These are three elements that we can all incorporate into our homes so that we become, and can teach our families to become, true givers. We can appreciate that small donations count, that small acts of kindness and support can transform people's lives and, lastly, that there is value in even feeling part of a worthwhile national or communal project. Following this paradigm will bring us a long way towards emulating the values that are conveyed in this parshah.

**Next Week: Parshat Tetzaveh:
Clothed in Strength & Dignity**