



Sacred Work • Parshat Teruma

“Leaders,” writes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in *The Home We Build Together*, “do not do the work on behalf of the people. They teach people how to do the work themselves.” These words offer an important perspective on this week’s sedra reading, *Teruma*, and the Torah portions that follow until the end of Exodus.

To understand the work, we have to look at the entirety of the book of Exodus. It can be divided into three distinct sections: 1) chapters 1-15 tell the Israelite story from slavery to freedom, 2) chapters 16-24 tell the movement to and from Sinai and the giving of the law, and 3) chapters 25-40 list the instruction and execution of the *Mishkan*, our portable Temple in the wilderness. The order makes sense. First, we have a shared story of our anguish, God’s salvation, and Moses’ leadership. Without freedom, we cannot receive and observe the laws that unite us. Once we have laws, we move from a shared past to shared values and behaviors. Our shared history and values enable us to build a holy community; the *Mishkan* represents the centerpiece of the camp, literally and emotionally,

“Me from every person whose heart is so moved” (Ex. 25:2). Everyone’s heart, it seems, was so moved. But what can a rag-tag group of former

slaves possibly have to contribute to the grandeur of the project? Certainly not the list of expected contributions:

And these are the gifts that you shall accept from them: gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats’ hair; tanned ram skins, dolphin skins, and acacia wood; oil for lighting, spices for the anointing oil and for the aromatic incense; lapis lazuli and other stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastplate. (Ex. 25:3-7)

It is unclear what some of these Hebrew terms mean. But what is less clear is how any of the Israelites obtained precious metals, rare skins and expensive dyes. Rashi, who offers a definition of almost every item, shares no wisdom on where these came from. R. Abraham ibn Ezra suggests that some of these goods came into Israelite hands because the people were told three times to take dresses and finery from the Egyptians before they left. He also suggests that either Israelites planted acacia trees when they were in Egypt and took the wood with them or there was a forest of acacia trees near Sinai.

Sforno suggests that only the gemstones that were described in Moses’ instructions should be contributed. Other items were rejected. Underlying his reading may be the notion that people, in their generosity, want to give of themselves but often donate objects because they have them and not because they are needed. The right way to give, suggests Sforno implicitly, is to understand first what the needs are.

However the Israelites obtained these materials is secondary to the fact that giving something of value helped them value the *Mishkan*. All of this activity was to fulfill God's mandate: "And let *them* make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among *them*" (25:8). Commentaries on this verse emphasize the second 'them' – when they build this portable sanctuary, God will live in the people rather than in the building. But the first them, I believe, explains the second. God will live in them because each one of them made a personal contribution to a joint project of holiness. As slaves, the Israelites were involved in building the edifices of the Egyptian empire. The back-breaking work did nothing to advance themselves as a people. Finally, they were able to build something extraordinary themselves.

This work was a labor of love. *Avot de-Rebbi Natan*, an ancient rabbinic collection of sayings, states: "A person should love work and not hate work. For just as the Torah was given in a covenant, so work was given in a covenant, as it says (Ex. 20:10): 'For six days you shall labor and do all your work, and the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Eternal your God'" (11:1). Work, according to this, should represent a fulfillment of our purpose on this earth. Just as the Sabbath is joyous and restorative, should the right work be purposeful and energizing.

To illustrate, the text continues with an example from the building of the *Mishkan*. According to Rabbi Natan, Moses led the building charge while his chiefs sat silently observing him and sla0

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