

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Vayakhel– Pikudei

This week, two short parshiot are read, Vayakel and Pekudei, and with them the book of Shemot comes to a close. These two parshiot are natural partners; together they describe the Jewish people's fulfillment of the mitzvah to build a Mishkan-sanctuary. And in both parshiot, we find the celebrated generosity of the Jews already in full blossom, just months after freedom from slavery.

The readiness, even eagerness, of the Jews to donate significant percentages of their personal wealth to the Mishkan building fund is a beautiful thing. But even more impressive than the giving of the men is the giving of the women.

“The men came upon the women; everyone whose heart motivated him brought bracelets, noserings, rings, body ornaments...” (Shemot 35:22). In other words, the men brought their wives' jewelry as donations for the mishkan. It's kind of easy to donate somebody else's stuff. What we want to know is whether the women gave their jewelry willingly. Did the men grab it without their wives' consent?

The *Da'at Zekeinim* (Torah commentary of Rashi's disciples, the Tosafists, 12th-14th centuries) contrasts the verse in question with a verse from the episode of the Golden Calf: “The people saw that Moshe had delayed in descending the mountain, and the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, ‘Rise up, make for us Gods that will go before us...’ Aaron said [to the people], ‘Remove the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives...’” Aaron was trying a delay tactic; he didn't think anyone would actually do such a thing. Unfortunately, he underestimated their madness. “The entire people removed the rings that were in their ears...” (32:1-3). Notice the wording, “the people removed the rings.” This indicates that to get the gold for the Golden Calf, the men forcibly removed their wives' rings. (Indeed, the Midrash states that the women were innocent of any wrongdoing. The sin of the golden calf was exclusively a sin of men.) However, when it came to donating to the Mishkan, the men did not forcibly remove their wives' rings, rather, “the men came to the women.” This indicates that the women voluntarily donated their jewelry for the Mishkan. The Midrash teaches that the women were rewarded for their strong stand against the Golden Calf and their selfless giving to the Mishkan with Rosh Chodesh, a monthly holiday honoring women.

The tough issue of where, what, and how we give to Jewish causes comes up again in our parsha. At the end of a long list of all the goods and services donated by the common men and women (35:21- 26), we find the following: “The princes (tribal leaders) brought the *shoham* stones and the filling stones for the *eiphod* and for the *choshen*; the spice and the oil for illumination and for the anointing oil, and the incense spices” (36:27-28). Why do the leaders of the community, the princes, come last? Even more disturbing, their donations seem quite meager in comparison to all the gold, silver and other valuables donated by the general public. Were the great princes of Israel stingy?



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“Rabbi Nathan taught, ‘Why when it came to the inauguration of the altar the princes were the first to contribute (Bamidbar 7:1-2), but for the construction of the Mishkan they were not first? The princes’ thinking was this: Let the community donate whatever they can, and we will fill in whatever is lacking [at the end]. But when the community provided [practically] everything that was needed, as it says, ‘and the work was sufficient’ (36:7), the princes got nervous that there was nothing left for them to do, so they brought the *Shoham* stones, etc. This is why, when it came to the inauguration of the altar, the princes saw to it to contribute first” (Sifrei 7:3; Rashi). The Midrash adds that there was a consequence for their delay: “Because the princes were initially slow [to donate], the Torah took off a letter from their name.” [A *yud* is missing from the word “*nisee’im*,” “princes”, in verse 27.] (Midrash Rabba 12:16; Rashi).

Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz (1875-1936), the master ethicist of yeshivas Mir, points out that the thinking of the princes appears quite good. What greater generosity could there be than to volunteer to fill in any lacking funds? Why are they taken to task, and why is a letter deleted from their name, if their heart was in the right place? It wasn’t the princes’ fault that the people quickly supplied almost everything needed for the Mishkan.

Reb Yerucham reveals the surprising message contained in this Midrash. When it comes to ethics, we should not be making calculations at all. Good intentions can have negative consequences, and the finest and most sensitive of calculations can result in the development of negative traits. As a result of the Princes’ plan, they pushed off donating to the Mishkan for later. Their thinking was certainly generous and commendable, but at the same time, their initial inaction spawned a certain degree of laziness. It reduced their stature and a letter of their name was lost. The Princes realized their mistake, and when it came to the dedication of the altar, they hurried to donate first.

When a mitzva presents itself, especially the mitzvah of tzedaka, it’s not the time for calculations. Our innate Jewish generosity is just too precious to suppress. If we want to maintain the health of all the letters of our Jewish selves, it is imperative that we act quickly when an opportunity to give comes our way.

Shabbat Shalom.

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