

PARSHAS TERUMAH

by Gedalia Litke

Among the items to be donated for the construction of the Mishkan are twelve precious stones, avnei milu'im, for use as part of the Choshen (breastplate). (25:7)

Rashi explains avnei milu'im as stones which serve the function of filling in the settings or indentations created for them in the Choshen. He derives this from the word milu'im which means something that fills a void. See Rashi in next week's Parsha, as well, 28:17. (The Ramban strongly disagrees with Rashi's explanation of milu'im. See the M'forshay Rashi for a defense and analysis of Rashi's view.)

The avnei milu'im were precious and beautiful. (28:17-20) To function as filling in or taking up space a stone does not have to be beautiful. According to Rashi why does the Torah choose to call these precious stones milu'im, referring merely to their function of filling in an existing setting - wouldn't it make more sense to call them stones of beauty or another name which references a positive defining characteristic beyond merely filling in? Furthermore each of the twelve avnei milu'im represent one of the twelve sh'vatim (tribes). Each shayvet has its unique role and mission, its specific tasks and its special way of serving Hashem. It would seem that stones representing the sh'vatim could be described with a bit more glamour than merely milu'im.

One answer I've heard which has timeless relevance is that in order to be build a Mishkan, or any other community project, each contributor must understand that his role is to provide what is needed, not what he would otherwise desire to provide. Filling the void per se is what is precious, and that is why, according to Rashi, the Torah describes these stones as milu'im. Even though the stones have such obvious beauty, perhaps because they have unsurpassed beauty, the Torah is emphasizing that their eternal value is in their role of filling a void.

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