

ACCORDING TO HIS ABILITY

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And they shall make a Temple for Me, and I will dwell among them..." [25:8]

In the (Medrash) Pesikta, it records that when G-d said this, Moshe trembled. He thought to himself, "how is it possible to build a house for G-d, Who encompasses and transcends all the heavens?" And G-d replied, reassuring him, "not by my standards, but in accordance with their abilities: twenty boards in the North..."

Then, when G-d began to discuss the sacrifices, Moshe said to himself, "would all the animals in the world provide even a single appropriate sacrifice?" And G-d replied, reassuring him again, "not as you imagine, but a single sheep in the morning..." And when G-d began to discuss the annual gift to the Temple, "each person in redemption for his soul," Moshe again thought, "how could a person ever give enough to redeem himself?" And once more, G-d replied, "not as you imagine, but one-half Shekel according to the sanctified Shekel measure..."

The Chofetz Chaim derives a profound, yet simple lesson from this Medrash: G-d does not demand the impossible, or the unreasonable. Every person is obligated to do only that which he or she can. As King Solomon said in Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) 9:10, "All that you find within your ability to do, act upon it..." which is to say, only that which is within your ability. We must do only that which has been placed upon us.

Every person is obligated to study, but according to one's abilities -- be that Mishna, Talmud, Ethics or Law. G-d does not expect every person to sit down and learn like a great scholar. Similarly, a person is obligated to give charity according to his or her wealth. A wealthy person cannot give only a small amount and claim to have fulfilled his or her obligation; neither should a poor person give away everything trying to meet the standards of the rich.

One of the great teachings of our Sages is that "tafasta merubah lo tafasta" -- when one tries to grab everything, he can come away with nothing. In our case, a person could become discouraged, worrying that it is impossible to do everything -- and then do nothing at all. On the contrary: we must do everything that we can, for what we can do is our obligation.

Good Shabbos,

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The author is the Director of Project Genesis.