

# IT'S THE THOUGHT THAT COUNTS

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

Parshas Terumah begins with the request for contributions for the Mishkan/Tabernacle. "Hashem (G-d) spoke to Moshe saying, 'Speak to the Children of Israel and let them take for Me a contribution; from every man whose heart inspires him you shall take My contribution.'" Mefarshim (commentators) are bothered by numerous problems in this passage: Why does the Torah insist on taking the contribution, "from every man whose heart inspires him?" Were the contributions of those with "uninspired hearts" refused? And would it not have been more grammatically correct to conclude, "you shall take their contribution," instead of, "My contribution?"

Chasam Sofer (Toras Moshe v. 1 p. 56) quotes the Gemara in Berachos (35a): "It is written (Tehillim/Psalms 24:1), 'To Hashem [belongs] the earth and its fullness.' Yet it is also written (Tehillim 115:16), 'The earth He has given to the sons of man.'" [These pesukim (verses) are seemingly incompatible: To whom does the earth "belong"; to Hashem or to man?] The Gemara answers that in fact the earth, and everything upon it is Hashem's, but when we make a beracha (blessing) on our food, it becomes "ours," in that we now have permission to use it.

Indeed, says the Chasam Sofer, everything - even our very selves - ultimately belong to Hashem. At best, what we have is on temporary loan. So what, in fact, can we "give" to Hashem. How is it possible to speak of a "contribution" if all we are doing in reality is giving Hashem what is already His? Can a son give his father his own money as a present?

When we give a gift to Hashem, so to speak, it is not the actual gift that is of any importance. Hashem, if He so desired, could easily create a Mishkan without our help. What we "give" Hashem is the generosity of our hearts, and the purity of our thoughts. It is not what we give, but how we give it. The age-old adage, "it's the thought that counts," takes on new meaning.

This is why the pasuk stresses, "from every man whose heart inspires him you shall take My contribution." Yes, money and goods were collected from one and all. But the only true contributors were those who gave with love and inspiration. Those who contributed begrudgingly in actuality gave nothing at all - other than the returning of possessions to their rightful owner. The only real contribution was the nedivus ha-lev of the generous-of-spirit. They understood that the actual donation was already, "My (i.e. Hashem's) contribution." But they could still "give" their pure and holy thoughts and emotions.

This, explains Chasam Sofer, is why Hashem, "Showed Moshe a coin-of-fire, and said, 'They should

give a coin like this,' (Midrash Tanchuma 9; Rashi, Ki Sisa 30:13)." When a Jew gives a donation to Hashem, it should be like the "coin-of-fire," burning with desire and nobility of spirit.

I have one difficulty with this. There is a remarkable Midrash (Shemos Rabbah 33:8) which questions the wording of the above pasuk, "From each man whose heart inspires him to give." Why was it necessary for the Torah to stress, "From each man?"

It teaches us, answers the Midrash, "That each-and-every Jew could have [on his own] provided for the entire Mishkan." The Midrash explains that the Jews of the desert had no shortage of riches, either from the "spoil of Mitzrayim (Egypt)" [Mechilta], or from the "gems and pearls" that would fall with the man (manna) each day [Shemos Rabbah ibid.]. Now if, in theory, each Jew could have provided for the Mishkan on his own - yet no one did so - where is the great generosity of spirit and nedivus ha-lev of which we speak? Why was there not even one Jew who was so moved and inspired as to offer to construct the entire Mishkan at his expense?

Perhaps, though, this question is rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept of generosity and goodwill. Is it generous to want to give the whole thing oneself, or is it greedy?

Be'er Moshe (p. 756) quotes the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos (5:13): "There are four types of donors to tzedakah (charity): One who wishes to give himself, but doesn't want others to give - he begrudges others... [But one who wishes] to give [himself], and that others give as well - he is a chassid (pious individual)."

If the purpose of giving charity was the gift, and if one's money and possessions were truly his own, then it would be a noble deed to "foot the bill" all on one's own, and save others the expense. But if the purpose of giving is the "inspired heart" that accompanies the donation, then giving itself becomes an exercise in character refinement and self-improvement. To monopolize the mitzvah would be to deprive others of the opportunity to recognize and proclaim their faith in Hashem's dominion, and to inspire and ignite their hearts as well. What at first appears to be the ultimate in magnanimousness, is in fact the ultimate in greed.

>From each man - yes, each and every Jew, could have, and would gladly have, donated the entire Mishkan. But they realized that there is far greater purpose here than just the donation. "From each man whose heart inspires him you shall take My contribution." Instead of doing it on their own, they worked together, each man encouraging and inspiring his neighbour to give as well: a multitude of inspiration.

When the opportunity to perform a mitzvah arises, we must seek to share that opportunity with others, and not keep it all to ourselves. If our goal is truly to give nachas ruach (pleasure) to Hashem, and not just to feel smug for having done a "complete mitzvah," then, as they say, the more the merrier.

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