

DOING WHAT WE MUST

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Torah Observance: Doing What We Must

The Torah tells us at the beginning of parshas Terumah that the Mishkan (Tabernacle) is to be built through the donations of B'nei Yisrael. Later on, in parshas Vayakhel (chapter 36), the Torah describes the outpouring of materials contributed towards the construction of the Mishkan and its accessories. One gets the impression that the Torah is encouraging goodwill and voluntarism; that it praises the Jewish people for their voluntary contributions.

In fact, however, the "terumah" or separation described at the very beginning of this week's parsha (and for which our parsha bears its name), actually refers to the obligatory half-shekel donation every Jew had to give, whether rich or poor. Rashi (25:2) writes that the sockets, which supported the beams of the Mishkan, were manufactured not from the voluntary donations, but rather from this mandatory half-shekel tax.

It is somewhat strange that the Torah seems to mix and mingle two distinct types of donations, mentioning both the obligatory and the voluntary contributions in one breath: Speak to B'nei Yisrael, and they shall take for Me a separation - referring to the mandatory half-shekel. From every man whose heart motivates him with a spirit of generosity shall you accept My separation - the "spirit of generosity" seemingly referring to the non-compulsory donations of additional materials needed for the construction of the Mishkan. Why does the Torah insist that the Mishkan be constructed with a combination of both voluntary and obligatory donations? And why does it mix them together in one verse?

The following conversation was once overheard between a Yeshiva rebbe and his student:

Rebbe: "Yosef, I'm very proud of you. Your learning has improved tremendously these past few days. Keep up the good work!"

Student: "Don't worry, Rebbe, next week I'll be back to my old, lazy self."

Rebbe: "Why's that, Yosef? Doesn't it feel good to put an effort into your studies? You're participating in classroom discussions, you're asking great questions, and you really understand the Gemara! Why wouldn't you want to keep it up?"

Student: "I'm only learning like this because the principal is on vacation this week. I enjoy sense of freedom and independence. But next week, when he's back patrolling the halls, my head will be on

the table like it usually is..."

There are some people who fight tooth-and-nail to get the biggest tuition reduction they can possibly negotiate, yet when approached for charity, are found to be generous and kind-hearted individuals. When you have a bunch of things to take care of, how often do you find yourself having completed the less-important and peripheral tasks, while endlessly pushing off those things you really need to take care of? (Or is it only me?...)

The nature of man is such that things done out of a sense of choice and free-will come easier than things we must do. Who deserves a greater reward - one who did a mitzvah he was obligated to do, or one who, out of the goodness of his heart, performed a mitzvah from which he was halachically exempt?

In a most surprising ruling, the Gemara decides that "One who performs a mandatory mitzvah is greater than one who performs a mitzvah voluntarily. (Kiddushin 31a)" This means that a person who sleeps in the sukkah when the weather is great and there is no reason not to deserves a greater reward than one who shivers through a bitter-cold night when he would halachically be permitted to sleep inside. Why? Perhaps it is precisely because it is easier for us to do something when we feel we have chosen to do so than it is when we feel we have no choice. No one will put us on a pedestal for davening Shacharis; but to recite some extra chapters of Tehillim - that makes us feel good.

Maharal (Gur Aryeh) explains that implicit in the above-mentioned Rashi is a critical lesson regarding avodas Hashem: Before we serve Hashem out of generosity and goodwill, we must first do so out of a sense of obligation and responsibility. There is reason to fear that, given the opportunity, a Jew might indeed give away everything he has in a most magnanimous donation to the Mishkan, and then have nothing left when the gabbai (beadle) came around for the half-shekel collection. ("Sorry - I'm broke.") Thus the Torah stresses that before one becomes captivated by the "heartwarming" spirit that accompanied the voluntary donations, it is critical that one first give the terumah, which, as Rashi explains, refers to the mandatory contribution.

It is likely no accident that the half-shekels were used to form the sockets which supported the very base of the Mishkan. Once there is a foundation of sense-of-responsibility upon which to build, generosity can indeed be used to construct the most grand and majestic structures. If, however, one tries to build upon voluntarism alone, then like a skyscraper built without a proper foundation, his structure is likely to come toppling down when the winds of reality begin to blow, and the once-grand spirit of generosity withers and dries up.

It is no secret that in the secular world, in recent times more so than ever before, everything is about avoiding a sense of burden and obligation. (Perhaps this is why so many couples now choose not to "tie the knot" with official marital vows, preferring instead to commit to one another voluntarily.) This tendency has, as all things do, seeped into the Torah world as well. It is an attitude that encourages one to do only that which he understands and feels good about, and any type of coercion is

considered harmful and threatening, if not unconstitutional. ("Don't tell me I have to do it - or I won't.")

As observant Jews, we must struggle to rise above this dangerous attitude. We must understand that Torah study and mitzvah performance must be based primarily upon a sense of commitment; only afterwards may one speak of the enjoyment and interest generated there from. Especially when educating our young, it is crucial that we instill within them an attitude that promotes doing the right thing because that's what Hashem said to do, and not because it feels good, or because it gives us a sense of satisfaction or pleasure. While Torah is and should be enjoyable, it is commitment that forms the very basis and foundation of serving Hashem - its bottom line and ultimate purpose.

Have a good Shabbos.

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