

COMMUNITY FUNDS FOR GOLDEN VESSELS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This parsha deals with the act of giving away one's money. But it does not deal with what we commonly call charity. Charity is given to individuals in need of support, either individually or to organizations that represent them and their needs. The terumah that the Torah refers to in this parsha is a voluntary act as is charity but it is goods and services to be given for the construction of a national entity, the mishkan. Otherwise charitable people have a strong aversion to donating to such projects. For after all, why do we need it? And why does it have to be so fancy? Is not simplicity better than gold and silver and precious stones? And does not this project divert funds that could otherwise have been better spent to help needy people and other more worthwhile causes? And does God really need a structure in which to dwell, so to speak? All of these seemingly legitimate questions seem to mitigate the essential fulfillment of the core mitzvah that appears in this parsha. ! So what is with this mishkan and all of the donations and labor and time that it will require to build? This is a key underlying question that requires some sort of answer for any understanding of not only this parsha but of the next four parshiyot that conclude the book of Shemot as well.

The Torah pays a great deal of attention to externals. It is interested in personal dress and appearance and in communal structures as well. It is in favor of large and more central congregations of Jews praying together rather than in small private prayer services. It stresses every detail in the construction of the mishkan and later of the Temple in Jerusalem because it wants us to appreciate the importance of community, of togetherness, of numbers and of the awe of ceremony and holy grandeur. In order to reinforce this sense of community, the Torah asked everyone, according to one's abilities, wealth and talents to contribute to the building of the mishkan. This was done in order to encourage all Jews to feel that this building was their personal mishkan. Separating one's self from the larger community, smaller and smaller venues of prayer, accommodating God's service to one's particular taste, convenience and desires is in the long run destructive to both the individual ! and the community. The rabbis taught us the principle that in the multitude of the people gathering for prayer lies the honor of the King. The increasing tendency of the shtibelization of the Orthodox world costs our cause dearly. After the destruction of the Temple, the synagogue became the "miniature Temple" of Israel in all of the lands of our dispersion. If the "miniature Temple" is not seen and treated as a mishkan, a place of beauty and awe and a place of large gathering, then we are missing something very important in our communal lives. If we will build our mishkan correctly and magnificently, then we can hope for the fulfillment of God's promise to us that "I will, so to speak, dwell within them" collectively and individually.

Shabat shalom.

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