

TRANSPARENCY BUILDING THE MISHKAN

by Rabbi Berel Wein

One of the many new but somehow always temporary buzzwords that are so beloved in our current society is "transparency." In our current world's lexicon this word has substituted for what earlier in my life our teachers used to call "accountability." No matter, the idea is the same; namely, that when it comes to public funds and positions one is held to be responsible to the nth degree for what occurs under one's aegis and watch.

In a project of such magnitude as creating the Tabernacle/Mishkan from scratch, making and collecting the necessary funds and materials, paying the workers and overseeing the construction, it is likely that it will be difficult to account for every agurah involved. Yet we see in this week's parsha that Moshe in fact did so.

The Midrash tells us that in the original accounting of receipts and expenditures, Moshe was off by one thousand shekels. Since it is likely that the value of the Tabernacle/Mishkan ran into millions of shekels one would think that being off by less than one percent regarding a project and budget of this magnitude could easily be overlooked and certainly forgiven.

However, the necessity for transparency and accountability when it comes to public funds is so vital that Moshe cannot let the matter pass. He searches and searches and finally is able to successfully account for the previously missing one thousand shekels. This sets the standard of the Torah when it comes to public charitable funds. Excellent accounting methods must be put into place to guarantee public trust and to prevent any misuse or slipshod handling of funds donated for the public good and/or holy purposes.

Money can be a terrible thing, especially when one's ego allows one the liberty to see one's self as all-powerful and exceedingly self-righteous. Handling public funds or being in a highly respected public position creates great temptations. The basest acts of malfeasance and even thievery can be rationalized and excused for one's self.

This has been so from the beginning of time, and as we are well aware, in our generation and present leadership, both religious and political are all prone to succumb to this temptation. Yet we are also aware that there are not enough police and prosecutors in the world to completely overcome this human weakness of temptation and monetary corruption.

It is interesting to note that in First Temple times when the Temple building was to be refurbished, the King had to forego any strict accounting of the funds collected by the priests for that purpose.

He rather, almost ruefully, had to rely on the trustworthiness of the priests themselves in the hope that no public funds would be siphoned off into private coffers.

The great lesson here is that honesty and probity is created from within and not from without. We need police and law enforcement in order to have a livable society. But without the self-discipline of honesty and the realization that the Lord holds us accountable for every one of our activities and for every agorah of public funds that passes through our fingers - we are accountable for every bit of behavior in public service - there can be no complete victory over the temptations of wealth and office. Perhaps that is one of the reasons for all of the detail and accounting that fill this final parsha of the book of Shemot/Exodus. Let us be strong and strengthen others!

Shabat shalom Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com