

THE FIRST BUILDING CAMPAIGN

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The initial and most successful building campaign in Jewish history is recorded for us in this week's Torah reading. The Torah, in recounting the event, teaches us that Moshe was to accept offerings of gold, silver, copper, precious stones, weaving materials, acacia wood, artistic talent and everything else that would be necessary for the construction of the great tabernacle/mishkan in the desert.

However, the Torah places a caveat on the donations of goods and services, wealth and talent that Moshe was to receive from the people of Israel. The Torah states that he was to accept all donations but only from those whose hearts and will motivated their generosity. We are all aware that it is much easier to write a check than to really feel good, excited and sincere about the donation.

The nature of human beings is to be less than forthcoming in their generosity and even if they are willing to part with some of their material possessions, the spirit and true intent of that generosity is often missing. Here the Torah is teaching us an important lesson. A building or any institution whose purpose is service of God and the spiritual enhancement of human beings cannot be built of human material generosity alone.

As the Talmud so succinctly phrases it, "God demands our heart." Professional fundraisers employ all means and tactics to raise money for their goals and projects. However, after many decades of observing fundraising techniques, I know that it is very difficult to penetrate the heart of the donor. Without such a penetration, the fund-raising exercise becomes devoid of spiritual meaning and soulful uplift.

I think that the giving feeling that the Torah emphasizes here is achievable only when one feels that the cause or object of one's generosity is really worth more than the wealth that one is parting with. The example I use in teaching is that if one feels that giving charity is the equivalent of paying one's taxes then that donation is completely devoid of any spiritual content. We all have to pay our taxes as a national duty and a practical necessity. Yet people do not feel any sort of spiritual achievement in paying their taxes. We may sign the check but our hearts are not in it.

This attitude, which after all is still acceptable when paying our material taxes is concerned (since no government is really interested in the spiritual effects of its taxes on the status of your soul), is not the attitude that will suffice when it comes to building a tabernacle/mishkan. In this latter case we are asked not only to give of our material wealth and personal talents but truly to give of ourselves as well.

The demand of the Torah is not only to give from our heart but to give our heart itself to the exalted cause and spiritual greatness of the tabernacle/mishkan. It is not a donation that the Torah asks of us, rather it is a commitment of self that is demanded. The tabernacle/mishkan has long ago disappeared from our physical view but its lessons remain relevant and important to us today as when they were taught millennia ago.

Shabbat shalom

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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