

Gift of a Willing Heart

Having received the stone tablets inscribed with the Decalogue ('ten commandments'), in chapters 25-27 of the Book of Exodus the Israelites now receive from God the task of building the Tabernacle: a portable shrine that will house the precious stone tablets.

Unless you are an architect with an interest in ancient temple structures, at first glance the details in this part of the Torah may test your patience! But let's stay with the sacred text, empowered by rabbinic insight, and see if we can unlock meaning for our lives. Read as much of these chapters as you can, then let's focus on a single verse: 25:2.

Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart is so moved" (25:2, JPS).

Note how three other translations express this:

"...from all whose hearts prompt them to give" (25:2, NRSV).

"...from every man whose heart makes-him-willing" (25:2, Fox).

"...from every man whose heart motivates him" (25:2 Stone ed., Mesorah).

What does your Bible say? A close reading of this verse has led Torah commentators to view it as shedding light on the whole Torah portion. Can you see why?

Following Rashi (11th century Torah scholar) we note that this building task is not only dedicated to the Lord's name, it is to be a voluntary effort, an expression of goodwill. It does not involve coercion, guilt or competition but hearts willingly moved, rightly motivated. How different is this work to the forced labour under Pharaoh's rule!

As a work of love, it is to be lifegiving, uniting the Israelites in a common goal, forming them as a people dedicated to the Lord's service. We are reminded that the gift of self, freely given, is at the heart of faith. An ethos of community service is a hallmark of both Judaism and Christianity.

When someone or something is precious to us, we tend to be aware of intricate details. "I love the way that lock of hair falls in the middle of her forehead," says the romantic lover. "Note how the pattern on the tiles has a subtle 'tree' motif," says the proud homeowner. Details overlooked as irrelevant by an 'outsider' are the mark of specialness to the 'insider' who is intimately connected with and applies significance to those details. In this light, can we start to hear the Torah text not as a tedious list of construction ingredients, but as a hymn of praise to the Living God? As the people are called to willingly gather, pool their offerings, contribute their skills and expend their energies, a sacred focal point will emerge in their midst which will have enduring significance for ages to come. Note the interpenetration of ordinary earthly tasks and an extraordinary spiritual perspective.

Reflection

Reflect on the gift of a willing heart. Think of a time when your heart was 'so moved' to undertake a great labour of love. What intricate details were part of that experience? Are there rituals/works in your life that were once a delight but are now undertaken with a sense of joyless obligation? What steps can you take to rediscover the original reason and enthusiasm for your giving?

* A point of note in the Hebrew text: *mikdash* ('sanctuary') is singular, while *betocham* indicates the plural (dwell 'among them').

Bibliography: Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus* (New York: Soncino, 1983); Herczeg, ed., trans. *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (New York: Mesorah, 1999); Schorsch, *Canon Without Closure* (New York, 2007).

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