

## Terumah – By Roger Klein (2013)

This parsha, Terumah, is almost entirely a detailed set of instructions about how to build the Mishkan, but I will focus today on the first sentence, which contains God's orders for marshaling the resources to building the Sanctuary, and within that sentence on the phrase "from every person whose heart makes him willing." If you're hoping that limiting myself to 8 words of the text will make this a brief drash, I have bad news for you.

The first sentence of the parsha is:

"And the Lord said to Moses, saying: 'Speak to the children of Israel, and have them bring Me a gift; from every person whose heart makes him willing, you shall take My gift.'

Let's break this sentence into 2 parts:

First, God directs an order to the people. The order is: 'People, bring me gifts.'

Second, God says to Moses: "You shall take gifts only from people whose heart makes them willing."

God's instructions are directed at 2 audiences. The first order is to the people of Israel. The second part is to the leaders – they may accept gifts only from people whose heart makes them willing. In effect, the leaders must serve as judges of motivation. When each member of the tribe offers a gift, the leaders must determine whether the gift came from the donor's heart. If not, the gift must be rejected.

The remainder of the parsha is very specific about the types of gifts required: gold, silver, acacia wood, dolphin skins. These are valuable things, and even more so in the middle of the desert. But even if someone makes the major sacrifice of donating one of these precious things, the gift will be rejected if it was not inspired by a willing heart.

As a lawyer would say, the gift-giving rule has an objective element and a subjective element. The objective element focuses on the action taken: Certain gifts must be made. The subjective element focused on the state of mind of the donor: The donor must have been motivated by his heart.

I'd like to ask two questions about this subjective element. First, what does it mean to give based on the willingness of your heart? And second, why does the state of mind of the donor matter at all?

I'll start with Ramban's ladder of tzedkah, which I'm sure most of you are familiar with. This is Maimonides' famous list of the levels of charity. Rambam divides giving into 8 categories, starting with the least praiseworthy and ascending to the most.

As I read it, at least 7 of Rambam's 8 levels relate to the state of mind of the donor. For example, the lowest level is "To give begrudgingly" – which sure sounds like giving that is not motivated by the heart. However, it's worth noting that the lowest rung is still on the ladder. In other words, Ramban seems to be saying that giving without heart is still giving and thus is still worthy of some praise.

The next level, the second from the bottom, is "To give less than is proper but to do so cheerfully." So following the parsha, Rambam gives an extra credit to someone who gives with heart. In fact, having a generous frame of mind bumps you up a rung on the ladder even if you gave too little. So when the objective nature of the gift is deficient but the donor's subjective state of mind is good, the subjective element of the test gets priority.

Rambam's 3<sup>d</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> levels are divided based on whether the donation was made before or after the donor was asked. Once again, this focuses on the heart of the donor, because giving without being asked seems to reflect a self-motivated sense of generosity, whereas someone who gives after being asked may be giving only because of social pressure. But let's not forget that the parsha starts off with a commandment from God. If Rambam believes we should demote an act of charity because it resulted from a request from another person, does the fact that a donation is made to comply with a commandment undermine the quality of the state of mind of the donor?

The 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> levels of the ladder look at whether the donor allows his name to be known or instead donates anonymously. Rambam takes a point away from the donor for allowing his name to be known – presumably because good publicity benefits the donor and thus undermines the position that he gave out of a selfless desire for tikkun olam. On the other hand, it's not even possible for donations to build the Mishkan to be anonymous. There was no way to throw your piece of gold into the pile when no one was looking. God specifically interposes a layer of leaders between the donors and the work project. The leaders not only know who each donor is, but they are directed to try to look each donor's his soul to determine his true feelings about giving.

At this point, we have some tentative answers to my first question: What does it mean to give because your heart made you willing? It might refer to giving for a reason other than to obtain a personal benefit for the donor. Actually, building the Mishkan will provide a benefit to the donors: God says in the parsha that if we build the Mishkan, he will dwell among us. (Sorry, I broke promise to talk only about the first sentence.) There is an overwhelming benefit to having God dwell among us, though one could argue that the benefit each donor receives from this is not contingent on his donation. The community as a whole builds the Mishkan, and the community as a whole benefits from God's presence among us. Since the Mishkan will not be built unless much of the community participates, and since God knew that some people might not participate, each person knows that his gift is neither necessary nor

sufficient to build the Mishkan. Thus, if someone does donate, we have evidence that he did so for selfless reasons.

But the requirement to give from one's heart also seems to focus on the pure emotional state of the donor. Rambam addresses this by distinguishing giving begrudgingly from giving cheerfully. These concepts don't relate to an intellectual calculation of benefits, but simply to the momentary feelings of the donor. Perhaps God is saying to the Jews, and to each one of us, that we can have Him only if we really want him. And maybe this explains why God demanded a tribe of ex-slaves wandering in the desert to devote their limited resources to building an impressive Mishkan: To get us lift ourselves above our immediate, selfish desires to a higher plane of feeling compassion and trying to heal the world.

I'm going to close with a story from a great book by Daniel Kahneman, the Israeli-born psychologist who received a Nobel prize for changing our understanding of how people make decisions. The book is called *Thinking Fast and Slow* and I recommend it.

The story is this: After a long illness, a man dies happily with his wife at his side holding his hand. After he dies, we learn that his wife was having an affair and stayed with him only for his money. How do we feel about the man's life after we learn about his wife's behavior?

It seems the wife did not truly love the man. But he thought she did, which helped to ease his death.

This corresponds to the subjective and objective elements of giving. The objective result of the wife's presence at the bedside was real and beneficial: At a critical time, she gave the man comfort. But her subjective intentions seem not to have come from her heart: She stayed with her husband for her own financial benefit and did not live a faithful life. It's hard to argue why her flawed intentions diminished the benefit her husband received from her presence, just like it's hard to argue that a poor person does not benefit from charity because the donor got a personal benefit from the gift.

What about the woman? Her goals do not seem praiseworthy. But maybe on some level she had mixed motives. It's hard to fake love, and hard to stay with someone through a difficult illness, so maybe the fact that the husband felt something from her presence means there were some real feelings there. Maybe this is why Rambam puts even self-interested donors on the ladder at all – maybe all giving reflects some degree of good intentions.

I read once that a massage provides health benefits not only to the client but also to the masseuse. Even though the masseuse is working for pay, the experience of touching someone, and maybe the feeling of helping someone, actually helps the helper. In Tzedakah, it seems you can have your cake and eat it too: You can give and

thereby benefit the recipient and yourself. So maybe the ultimate message here is: Give to others. And when you do, visualize what you did and feel good about it, because it helps you too.