"*Vayyak'hel*: The Mishkan, a paradigm for giving"

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Moses assembles the entire nation to show them what, under his guidance, Betzalel had constructed - the architecture of the Mishkan and the various ritual vessels that would be used in it – and, no doubt, to explain their purpose and symbolism.

At first glance it may seem curious that the detailed description found here of all the work that its construction had necessitated, and the materials that the nation had been called upon to contribute, constitutes no more than a veritable repetition of the original instructions for the project that had already been recorded in fine detail earlier (See Ex. 25:1 - 30:10, 17 – 37; 31:1-10). The only difference is that here the verbs are in the past tense, denoting that everything had now been completed, and to God's complete satisfaction.

But, had that been its sole purpose, the Torah could have made the point adequately by employing a concise general statement to that effect, rather than taking up the space of two sidrot! Indeed, if we turn over a few pages we see that such a statement is in fact recorded – twice!:

> *Thus was completed all the work of the Tabernacle of the tent of Meeting, and the Israelites did so. Just as the Lord had commanded Moses, so they did* (Ex. 39:32).
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> *Just as the Lord had commanded Moses, so the Israelites performed all the work. And when Moses saw that they had performed all the tasks as the Lord had commanded them to do, Moses blessed them.* (39:42-43)

Now, the opening verse of our sidrah – *And Moses assembled the whole Israelite community* (35:1) - combined with the above three verses, provides the answer to our question.

We know that Betzalel was designated as the chief artisan of the entire Mishkan project, the manufacture its utensils and the building of the Ark of the Covenant (Ex. 31:1-6; 35:30 – 36:2; chs. 36-39), ably assisted by Oholiav (38:23) and any others who had special building and design skills (35:10). Yet this was a national project in which every individual was meant to feel a sense of partnership, and the immanent presence of God. And hence, the first verse above makes no referenced to Betzalel and Oholiav, but rather to 'the Israelites' having 'completed all the work'; and the second two verses, similarly, to 'the Israelites [having] performed all the work' and 'the tasks…the Lord had commanded them.' And 'Moses blesses them' as if they had truly all been involved in every aspect of its construction: those who had contributed materials – in most case their most precious possessions – equally like those who had fashioned the objects.

And this explains why the Torah wished to repeat every item that had been contributed, and to record the gratitude that Moses felt for the enthusiasm with which the nation had embraced this project. Just a little while earlier they were all worshipping the Golden Calf; now they were demonstrating that that had been a rash moment, born of fear and a sense of panic that Moses had abandoned them, and perhaps God also together with him! Their joy now was palpable, as was their feeling that God's desire to have a tangible residence among them was a demonstration of His forgiveness and desire for reconciliation.

The repetition of all the items that the nation had contributed was an important gesture of divine appreciation and a demonstration of the value that God had placed on the nation's repentance, generosity and desire for proximity.

So, the Vayyakhel assembling of the entire nation was an official 'hand over' of all the components of the Mishkan, and an opportunity for the nation to see for the first time exactly wherein their donations had been invested, and to satisfy itself that all the gold, silver and precious materials that had been donated had properly been assigned to that venture. The following sidrah, Pekudei, proceeds to describe the inventory that Moses ordered of the weight of all the gold, silver and copper. Transparency was demonstrated as essential when receiving charitable donations or handling public funds, especially for grand projects. Surely a timeless message!

The question might be asked regarding the propriety of requesting the people to make such donations and part with their prized possessions. To answer this we should consider the origin of those objects. The Israelites had been slaves for a few centuries. They certainly had no means of accumulating gold, silver, or even copper! It could only have been obtained from their Egyptian neighbours during the plague of darkness. This was a concession allowed to them by God as recompense for those centuries of enslavement when they received no wages at all for their back-breaking work on Pharaoh Rameses II numerous building projects. Hence, God, as the Master of the Israelites slaves (See Lev. 25:42), was the one principally deprived of their service, and fully entitled, therefore, to a share of what they had received. In a sense, this was similar to other free will offerings that the Torah prescribes.

There was also another purpose in requesting offerings and gifts from the Israelites. We take it for granted that, in lots of situations, we take gifts to people, to express our gratitude for services rendered or when invited to a social event. As slaves in Egypt, the Israelites would not have been in an environment where such social interaction would have been experienced; so they needed to be taught and conditioned to demonstrate gratitude and to willingly part with their belongings.

This was also necessary to enable them to fulfil a wide range of mitzvot, under the rubric of tzedakah (philanthropy), that the Torah prescribes as a religious duty and ethical obligation. These include the various regular tithes to be given to the Priests and Levites, and the gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and corners of the fields, that the landowner had to leave for the widow, the stranger and the poor.

Sensitivity toward the condition of the poor, and the obligation to extend a helping hand, comes over powerfully in many passages of the Torah. Here are but a few:

> *If you lend money to one of My people among you who is poor, you must not act as a creditor toward him; you are not to charge him interest (Ex. 22:25).*

> *If there is a poor man among your brothers within any of the gates in the land that the LORD your God is giving you, then you are not to harden your heart or withdraw your hand from your poor brother (Deut. 15:7).*

> *Do not charge your brother interest on money, food, or any other type of loan (Deut. 23:19).*

> *Do not oppress a hired hand who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother or a stranger dwelling in one of your towns (24:14).*
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> *You shall not oppress a poor or destitute hired person among your brethren, or a stranger in your land or your cities. You must pay his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and his life depends on it. Let him not have to cry out to the Lord against you, for you shall be held guilty of sin (Deut. 24:14-15).*

The Israelites learnt very quickly how to give with a full heart; and in our sidrah we have the most unusual, if not humorous, situation of Moses being told by his artisans that they were being inundated with gifts which they wouldn't be able to use for the project!

> They received from Moses all the gifts that the Israelites had brought to carry out the tasks connected with the service of the sanctuary. But these continued to bring freewill offerings to him morning after morning, all the artisans came…and said to Moses, "The people are bringing more than is needed for the tasks entailed in the work that the Lord has commanded to be done." Moses thereupon had this proclamation made throughout the camp: "Let no man or woman make further effort toward gifts for the sanctuary!" So the people stopped bringing… (Ex. 36:5).

In this way, Judaism conditioned its adherents to be generous donors to charitable causes, and not only those devoted to the support of their own coreligionists. In Britain such philanthropy has a particularly distinguished history, and the names of the

Montefiore and Rothschild dynasties from the 19th century; in the 20th century, the Wolfson, Rayne, Clore, Wohl, and Pears foundations; and, more recently, Sir Lloyd Dorfman, Lord Sugar and Sir John Ritblat - to name but a few - are synonymous with support for a wide variety of Jewish, non-Jewish, and national causes.

Our community justifiably prides itself on its record in this area. An Institute for Jewish Policy Research report of 2016 showed that, compared with the 57% of the general population who contributed to charity, the rate for Jewish contributors was 93%. Among 'high net worth individuals' the same discrepancy is also found, with the Giving List of 2014 reporting that as many of 12 % of donors in that category were Jewish.

This week I happened to tune in to the BBC's 'Start the week' programme (21/2/2022), on the life of the Baghdadi mega-philanthropist David Sassoon (1792-1864) who arrived in Bombay (present Mumbai) in 1832, fleeing persecution by the ruler of his country of birth. The dynasty he founded was known as 'The Rothschilds of the East,' and they were known for the integrity of their business dealings. The programme presenter referred to the fact that Sassoon insisted that a percentage for charity was written into every one of his business contracts!

While it is sometimes difficult to sustain the challenge held out to us to be *or la-goyyim*, 'a light unto the nations' (Is. 42:6), certainly in the realm of philanthropy we have succeeded proudly and immeasurably.

Shabbat shalom

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