

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Terumah

Whenever we read Parashat Terumah, I think of the great old movie, “The Bishop’s Wife.” The original movie, starring David Niven (at his most persnickety) as the Anglican Bishop who wants to raise the money to build a cathedral; Loretta Young, at her most charming and vivacious, tempting even an angel, as his wife; and Cary Grant, at his most debonair, as the angel in question.

The climax of the movie has Cary Grant, acting as the Bishop’s assistant, convincing the elderly widow not to donate the money to build the cathedral that Bishop David Niven wants to build, but rather to donate the money to the poor. This is why I relate the movie to this Parasha, because *Terumah* discusses fundraising for the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle. The funds were donated, not by the wealthy, but by the ordinary people, even by the poor. We know this because we learn in Parashat Naso that the *Nesi'im*, the leaders of the Tribes, did not donate to the *Mishkan*. They waited to see what would be needed, intending to make up the difference, but there was nothing to make up. The people’s donations were more than sufficient.

Even in the Middle Ages, the famous cathedrals of Europe were not built by the rich, but by the poor, who proudly and willingly donated their time and labor, as well as their hard earned pennies, to fulfill their spiritual aspirations. It is only in Hollywood that Bishop Niven can be embarrassed at wanting to build a cathedral to inspire the poor, rather than to raise money only to feed them. The poor understand that a meal will last only a few hours, but inspiration can last a lifetime. Having a place where one can go to feel the presence of God is much more important than a temporary increase in ones daily caloric intake.

The other lesson from the Parasha is that all donations were voluntary. Surely, Moses could have instituted a tax to raise the funds. There was to be a tax, the famous half shekel, which was to be used for upkeep and purchase of communal sacrifices, but funding the initial building was strictly voluntary. It is only by voluntary contributions that people can be bound up in a cause. We read in the Haftarah how Solomon instituted a tax to build the Temple and we know, with hindsight, what a mistake it was, as the nation revolted after Solomon died. The easy way, forced contributions, is not

Rabbi Willig has published many articles in Nishma and The Jewish Week.

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necessarily the best way. It is far better to let the people volunteer, to become inspired, to make the project theirs, rather than something forced upon them from the outside.

May our synagogues be a source of inspiration for us. May they be a place where we can feel the presence of God, the source of all blessings.

Shabbat Shalom!

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