

After learning basic rules for creating a viable society, the Israelites are commanded to build the *mishkan*, their portable place of communal worship. The materials for building and outfitting it and its priests are to be collected through free-will offerings, as the word *terumah* suggests. It derives from the root *רומ*, which forms words such as raise, exalt, height, and donation/contribution. As we will read three weeks from now in a nearly identical reprise, the people's boundless enthusiasm generates even more of the required materials than is needed. They are to bring gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson wool; linen and goat hair; red-dyed ram skins and *tachash* skins; acacia wood; oil and spices; and precious stones for the High Priest's garments. Much has been written about these materials and how a small group of refugees wandering in the desert could have procured them. Back in Parashah Bo we learned that Moses had instructed the Israelites to request from the Egyptians silver and gold implements (*כלי* *kli* – a catchall word for tools, vessels, tableware, instruments, and even weapons), and that the Egyptians gave them willingly. So obviously, the Israelites are well equipped to donate a portion of these to the cause. Wool, goat hair, and even flax for linen were readily available, and opinions vary regarding the stones. But what about the wood; and what are *tachash* skins? This elusive word is translated variously as seal, shark, dolphin, or sea cow. In modern Hebrew it is also slang for dachshund! No wonder our sages were able to let their imaginations run wild. Talmud Tractate Shabbat 28a discusses whether these *tachashim* are kosher: "And the *tachashim* were similar to the species of undomesticated animals called *tela ilan*. ... R. Nechemya intended to say that it was like a *tela ilan* in that it was multicolored ... but the covering of the tent was made from kosher animals." Midrash Tanchuma elaborates on multicolored: "R. Judah said it was a large, pure animal, with a single horn in its forehead and a skin of six different colors, that roamed the desert. They captured one of them and from its skin made a covering for the ark. R. Nechemya contended that it was a miraculous creature He [HaShem] created for that precise moment, and it disappeared immediately thereafter from earth." Rainbow unicorns already in the Talmud – Kohelet is right: There is nothing new under the sun! The acacia, or cedar wood poses a different problem: How can there be that much wood in the desert? Midrash Tanchuma offers an answer here too: "Jacob our patriarch planted them at the time he descended to Egypt. He told his children: 'My sons, ultimately you will be redeemed ... therefore, go plant cedar trees now so that when He commands you to erect a Sanctuary for Him, beams of cedar will be available.' ..." The midrash also connects *shittim*, the Hebrew word for this tree to the place where the Israelites sinned with Moabite women and began to worship Baal-Peor. "They sinned at Shittim; they were smitten at Shittim ... and they were healed by means of Shittim. You find that they did not leave that place until Pinchas arose and turned away His wrath ..." (Numbers 25:4 – 11) It is noteworthy that nothing is said in our parashah about what or how much each person should give, but both men and women are moved to contribute both possessions and labor. There is only one caveat: "... from every person whose heart inspires him to generosity, you shall take My offering." (25:2) In other words, gifts given freely contribute to the holiness of the endeavor while gifts given only because they are required may be imbued with resentment, which would detract from the holiness of the *mishkan*. Our Haftarah portion is the polar opposite. There is no mention of anything voluntary; instead, Salomon initiates a harsh program of forced labor to build the long-awaited Temple. He first issues a levy of 30,000 men, who are sent to Lebanon in monthly rotations of 10,000 to procure wood. In addition he has 70,000 porters and 80,000 quarriers laboring in the hills, along with 3,300 supervisors. Salomon even finds a devious way to circumvent HaShem's commandment at the end of Parashah Yitro, "And when you make for Me an altar of stones, you shall not build them of hewn stones, lest you wield your sword upon it and desecrate it." (20:22): "And the house, when it was in building, was built of stone finished at the quarry, and there was neither hammer nor axe, nor any tool of iron heard in the house, while it was in building." (6:7) As we know, this Temple and its successor were both eventually destroyed. In his *Torah Shlemah* Menachem Mendel Kasher quotes a medieval midrash: "The Tabernacle, for which the people volunteered wholeheartedly never fell victim to the evil eye. The Temple, however, for which they did not, fell victim to the hand of the enemy." For most of our history, we have relied on voluntary societies to provide essential communal services, from visiting the sick and burying the dead, to educating the people, aiding the poor, and providing for the needs of the synagogue. No Jewish community can exist without the combined efforts of the countless individuals who contribute their time and energy for the good of all. The *mi-sheberach* prayer after the Haftarah reading honors "whoever dedicates synagogues for prayer, and whoever enters them to pray, and whoever donates lamps for lighting, wine for Kiddush and Havdalah, food for wayfarers, charity for the poor; and whoever occupies himself with the needs of the community." With very contribution, no matter the size, we perpetuate the tradition that has sustained us from the beginning – a tradition built on the joy of giving and of participating in community.