

Now that the initial body of laws has been introduced, the scene shifts to fundraising and building. To help them understand the nature of HaShem's covenant, the people need a tangible focal point. To this end, they are asked to contribute toward outfitting and constructing a worthy sanctuary in which HaShem will "dwell." Every detail is precisely laid out, and the entire process is highly symbolic. For our own understanding, it is necessary to define the pertinent words. *Terumah* (תְּרוּמָה), which derives from the root *רומ* – to raise, lift up, means contribution, tithe, or freewill offering, usually to HaShem, but also to humans, i.e., priests. This means that these offerings of goods or money are to be designated for a higher purpose and therefore must be of the finest quality. "And they shall make Me a sanctuary (*mikdash* - מִקְדָּשׁ) and I shall dwell in their midst. According to all that I shall show you, the pattern of the *mishkan* (מִשְׁכָּן) and the pattern of all its vessels; and so you shall do." (25:8-9) The root (שָׁכַן) means to dwell, reside, be located. The words *mishkan* and *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) derive from it. It is noteworthy that HaShem first calls the place they are to build *mikdash*. This word stems from the root (שָׁדַח), which means holy, or sanctified, but denotes setting aside, designating. The word *mikdash* first appears in the Song of the Sea: "... directed toward Your habitation, which You made, O Lord; the sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands founded. (15:17) Indeed, the people need a place set aside for holiness, a place separated from daily life and entirely devoted to grateful worship of HaShem. This concept is the foundation upon which the *mishkan* can be built, the prerequisite for HaShem's "dwelling" in the midst of the people. Later, HaShem tells Moses, "I will arrange My meetings with you there, and I will speak with you from atop the ark cover from between the two cherubim that are upon the Ark of the Testimony ..." (25:22) A careful reading of the text indicates that the cherubim are to be understood as a sort of stage setting. They are the polar opposite of pagan idols, which were imbued by their devotees with human and superhuman powers. It is in those empty spaces, not in the objects themselves, that HaShem "dwells" and communicates. However costly and extravagant they are, all objects, which can only be fashioned from the resources HaShem has provided, only serve to focus us; we do not worship them. Indeed, the *mishkan* is meticulously constructed from the finest of materials, and of course one wonders how the Israelites managed to procure such riches in the desert. One possibility is the goods they took from the Egyptians as they were departing. (12:36) However, Midrash Tanchuma Terumah 4-5 offers this explanation: "The Holy One of Blessing said to them [the Israelites], 'Each one of you was counted among my profession (*emunim* – covenant, support, confirmation [the word *amen*], trust), and so I redeemed you from Egypt, but you did not set aside offerings to Me. Hence it is written, *take for Me an offering.*' And this is the offering ... The Holy One of Blessing said to them, 'Actually you do not bring your own possessions, but the spoils I gave you at the Red Sea ... Do not imagine you are repaying Me. The 13 things you have set aside for Me are the 13 things I did in your behalf in Egypt: *I clothed you with richly woven work, shod you with tachash skin, wound fine linen around your head and covered you with silk, decked you with ornaments, put bracelets on your hands, and a chain on your neck; and I put a ring on your nose and earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown on your head. My bread also ...*'" In other words, until now, the Israelites had only been beneficiaries. Now, they are being called upon to become benefactors, which, although they might not yet realize it, removes the last vestiges of slavery and elevates them to the status of free people. This is the first step toward learning the sometimes painful lesson we all have to learn in order to become responsible adults: Freedom is not free; it comes with obligations, and no one is exempt. Even those who are themselves dependent on charity are obligated to contribute, for example, the half-shekel tax on all males from the age of 20 (Exodus 30:15). The amount is far less relevant than the dignifying effect of giving. Giving also helps form community, another vital learning experience for the Israelites. They are all invested in this building project, and long after its completion they will continue to benefit from it in countless ways. Regardless of their origin, the materials for the *mishkan* are to be taken "from every person whose heart inspires him to contribute *terumah* ..." (25:1). Whether goods, money, or labor, the very act of giving is itself a contribution, both to the community and to the dignity of the donor. The most profound and far-reaching aspect of this entire project is the sharp contrast between having been forced to build structures from which they derived no benefit, and being asked to voluntarily contribute toward building a place to worship HaShem, Who has made it possible, and in the process to lay the groundwork for the society that will unite them and transform them from *bnei* (children) *Yisrael* to *am* (people/nation) *Yisrael*. This notion of giving from the heart rather than through coercion will not be easy to uphold. That is evident in our Haftarah reading, where Salomon resorts to using forced labor to build the Temple. (I Kings, 5:27-31) Giving from the heart is not always easy. Today's inflation, cutbacks, and increasing demands from all sides, along with concern about where our contributions are actually going, can be deterrents. But we dare not neglect this vital commandment. Great or small, material, or with our time and talents, the reciprocity of giving and receiving strengthens our bonds as it strengthens us.

Shabbat shalom!