

Often people wonder where *bnei Yisrael* acquired the materials they donated for the construction of the Tabernacle, the *mishkan*. If the Israelites were wandering through the wilderness, they would seem not to have access to materials like gold and silver, yarn, linen, ram skins, acacia wood, oil, and spices.

The answer comes from *parshat Bo*:

“”The Israelites had done Moses’ bidding and borrowed from the Egyptians objects of silver and gold, and clothing. And the Lord had disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people, and they let them have their request; thus they stripped the Egyptians” (12:35-36)

וּבְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עָשׂוּ כְדִבְרֵי מֹשֶׁה וַיִּשְׁאַלוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם כְּלֵי־כֶסֶף וּכְלֵי זָהָב
וּשְׂמֹלֹת: וַיִּקְוֶן נָתַן אֶת־תְּנוּ הָעַם בְּעֵינֵי מִצְרַיִם וַיִּשְׁאַלוּם וַיִּנְצְלוּ
אֶת־מִצְרַיִם: (פ)

“Silver and gold, and clothing” – from here we learn where the Jews got the materials that they donated to the mishkan. What’s most interesting is the use of the word “borrow.” We know the Jews did not intend to return to Egypt. How then could they return the silver, gold, and clothing to the Egyptians. Not until this parsha – Terumah – do we learn why the Torah uses the word *וַיִּשְׁאַלוּ* – “borrow.” The meaning is not that they would return them to the Egyptians but that they would give them to God. In Terumah, that is what the Jews do; we donate these

materials for the sake of the construction of the mishkan.

We learn an important lesson from this. The lesson we learn is about wealth but not exclusively to wealth. Everything that is ours – including our very own persons – is on loan from the *kadosh Baruch Hu* the Holy One Blessed be He. Nothing that is ours is absolutely ours. What is ours is on loan from God. Just as bnei yisrael gave these possessions over to Moses for the purpose of building the mishkan, so too we should dedicate that which is ours to purposes that align with God's will.

If we have an ability, if we possess a trait, if we have access to a resource, we should conceive of ways to dedicate that gift to a purpose that aligns with God's will. This is why the Jews built the Mishkan.

The example of wealth is only the most common and familiar of ways in which we can give. Yes, we work, and the wealth we acquire is earned, but we should recognize that the wealth we acquire has been given to us with God's blessing so that we give it for the sake of a worthy purpose.

The Torah calls the gold and silver, yarn, linen, ram skins, acacia wood, oil, and spices that Israel

dedicated to the mishkan “gifts.” “Gifts” is a translation of the Hebrew word *terumah*. The root of *terumah* is *resh vuv mem*, which means to elevate.

We may recognize this root word from Ashrei:

אַרְוַמְמֶנּוּ אֱלֹהֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאַבְרַכָּהּ שְׁמֶךָ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד

“I will extol You, my God and king, and bless Your name forever and ever (145:1). Or consider a phrase from the opening of Pesukei De Zimrah, which is also recited as the Torah is carried through the congregation before it is read:

רוֹמְמוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְהִשְׁתַּחוּוּ לְהַדָּם רַגְלָיו קְדוֹשׁ הוּא

“Extol the Lord our God and bow before his footstool: He is holy” (99:5)

“Extol” and “elevate” are synonymous. At first, I was puzzled. How is the one who gives the gift

elevated? She has parted with something; she is now lacking what she once had. Sure, she was moved to do it, but one would think the one receiving the gift is the one lifted up because he now has more than he had. The Torah is teaching us the opposite. Giving gifts elevates the giver, not the receiver. The giver may be materially depleted, but that depletion generates an immaterial, spiritual elevation.

When I was living in Manhattan during my twenties, Stuyvestant High School was down the street, and they opened its gym on the weekend for pick-up games. I went there, and once I played on the same team as a young man who jumped like an

NBA player. We talked after the game, and I expressed my surprise that he wasn't playing college basketball. Even though I didn't have any great contacts, I offered to be helpful to him in any way I could even providing him with some training. He took me up on that, but the first time we met he brought me a box of fruit and beverage. I had a sense that he wasn't from a home with lots of dispensable income. I was reluctant to accept the gift from him. The second time we met, he did the same thing. Each time, I accepted the gift a bit sheepishly.

I wanted to say to him, "Hey. I know you're hard up. You don't need to spend money to bring me

a gift.” I realized, though, how important giving a gift was to him. While he didn’t have money to spare, he still gave gifts because of the elevation that giving gifts bestows upon the giver.

My whole perspective on gift-giving changed at that point, and I understood why nearly everyone in society across the economic spectrum participate in gift-giving. The reason is because gift-giving brings a feeling of elevation, just as our parsha teaches. It also is a reflection of our sense that our very lives are gifts from the kadosh baruch hu.

We can go further in this direction. The word “gifted” implies something unearned, natural, built-

in, almost genetic. We describe certain people as “gifted” to illustrate that our talents have an origin outside of ourselves. Because they do, we have a responsibility to employ our talents in a way that serves a greater purpose. The building of the mishkah was the greater purpose that inspired the Jews to give in the time of the Exodus. We need to ascertain what purposes we direct our talents, too, and we have to interrogate ourselves whether we are using what has been given to us toward appropriate ends.

More than anything, the gift is symbolic of God’s grace. Grace is a part of Judaism. We notice it

most prominently in the blessing for peace at the conclusion of the Amidah recited in the morning at shachrit and musaf:

חַן וְחֶסֶד וְרַחֲמִים עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל עַמְּךָ

חן means “grace.” Our greatest aspiration, peace, is associated with gifts. To receive that gift, let us become gift-givers.