

Parsha Ponders

Vayakhel – Pekudei (HaChodesh) | March 19, 2020 | 23 Adar 5780

Filling a need or needing to fill¹

והנשיאם הביאו את אבני השהם ואת אבני המלאים לאפוד ולחשן

The princes brought the *shosham* stones and the filling stones for the *Eiphod* and the *Choshen*²

This week's *parsha* describes the construction of the *Mishkan*. It starts with a detailed listing of the donation of the materials towards building it. The entire Jewish people jumped at the opportunity to donate towards the *Mishkan*. There came a point when donations had to be turned down, as all of the necessary materials had already been collected³. The princes, the leaders of each tribe, are described as bringing precious stones for the garments of the Kohen Gadol.

Rashi explains⁴ that their original plan was to let the people donate first, and they would fill in anything that was missing. It sounded like a good idea, but in the end, there was nothing left to contribute. They found one last thing that was necessary, which was the precious stones. Later⁵, when the *Mishkan* was completed and its inauguration was being celebrated, the princes acted differently. They all came together and donated several offerings, which were never commanded. Hashem saw their sincerity and accepted their donations. This is different than their behavior in our *parsha*. What changed⁶?

There are three *mitzvos* in the Torah that start with the word אם, usually translated as “if”. ואם-מזבח, the *mitzvah* to build an altar⁷. אם כסף תלוה, the *mitzvah* to lend money, and more generally the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*⁸. אם תקריב מנחת בכורים, the *mitzvah* of the *omer* offering after Pesach⁹. If אם is translated as “if”, these verses are saying: “if you build an altar”, “if you give *tzedakah*”, “if you bring the offering”. Rashi assures us¹⁰ that these are not voluntary *mitzvos*, but rather bona fide commands. Why then are they expressed in an optional way?

King David was once sitting in his palace, and he noticed that the Temple vessels were sitting in a tent outside¹¹. There was no Temple yet, and the vessels had been recently transported to Jerusalem. The tent was their temporary structure. King David was upset that the vessels had no structure to house them, and decided he wanted to begin the construction of the Temple. The prophet Nossan told him that he would not build the Temple, rather his son would. Why couldn't he¹²?

¹ Based on something I once heard from Rabbi Ari Galandauer, now of North Miami Beach, FL. He told me the basic premise is from Rav Zev Leff of Moshav Matityahu

² Exodus 35:27

³ Ibid 36:7

⁴ Rashi to ibid 35:27, quoting Sifrei Bamidbar § 45 and Bamidbar Rabbah 12:16

⁵ Numbers Chapter 7

⁶ Simply put, Rashi loc. cit. explains that there was a criticism against them, as their actions were considered coming from laziness. We could say that they wanted to change their ways and were eager to volunteer offerings when the opportunity arose

⁷ Exodus 20:22

⁸ Exodus 22:24

⁹ Leviticus 2:14

¹⁰ Rashi to Exodus 20:22, quoting Mechilta ad. loc., brought in Yalkut Shimoni § 306

¹¹ I Samuel Chapter 7

¹² Although the verse explicitly says the reason is because King David had bloodshed on his hands (I Chronicles 22:8, see also Pesikta Rabbasi § 2 (brought in Yalkut Shimoni Nach § 144), and Midrash Tehillim 62:4 (with a similar version brought in Yalkut Shimoni Nach § 145)), the following is a deeper reason

Chazal teach us¹³ that *chesed*, loving kindness, is greater than *tzedakah* in three ways. *Chesed* can be done with one's body, not just one's money. *Chesed* can be done for the rich, not just the poor. *Chesed* can be done for the deceased, not just for the living. What these three have in common is they're not necessarily coming from a need. *Tzedakah* is given to people who need it, in the way they need it. There's something lacking, and it's being filled. *Chesed* can even be for those who don't need it, or those who don't realize they've received it. It's not coming from a lack, rather it's coming from a need to give. There isn't necessarily an external impulse prompting the *chesed*. We see this from Avraham, who would sit outside on a hot day waiting for guests, even though no one would likely travel on such a day¹⁴.

This isn't true just for *chesed*. Hashem wants us to serve Him not because He said so, but because we want to. King David didn't have an internal need to build the Temple. He was prompted by seeing the Temple vessels in the tent. Since he didn't have this inherent desire, he was withheld from the opportunity. The three *mitzvos* of building an altar, giving *tzedakah*, and bringing the *omer* offering, are written as "optional" because they uniquely demonstrate Hashem's desire for us to want to fulfill them.

The altar relates to Temple offerings. Offerings are meant to be a gift for Hashem. Hashem doesn't need them, He wants us to want to give them. Giving *tzedakah* doesn't make sense if you give and say: "I was commanded to give this to you". Rather, you should want to give *tzedakah*, and tell them so. The *omer* offering is giving thanks for the harvest. It's not really considered saying thanks if you say it because you are required to. It's only meaningful if it's sincere.

The princes didn't feel a need to give. They felt that their role was to fill a need. When there was no need, there was nothing for them to do. Their attitude changed when the *Mishkan's* construction was completed, and the Divine Presence was amongst them. They were so grateful that they were filled with a need to give. They couldn't hold back. They got up and volunteered offerings that were never commanded. Hashem saw their sincerity, and accepted their gifts graciously.

Good Shabbos. May Hashem protect us all in this difficult time that we're in, and keep us and our families healthy.

¹³ [Sukkah 49b](#)

¹⁴ See [Genesis 18:1](#) with [Rashi](#), quoting [Bava Metziah 86b](#)