

## Parshat Vayakhel: On Generosity, Love and Being Loved Shabbat Shekalim

**Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler**

*Director of Spiritual Development, Maharat*

*Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2018*

In the aftermath of all of the the dramatic events at Sinai detailed in last week's *parsha*--the Golden Calf, the Tablets broken and renewed, the people condemned then saved--*parshat Vayakhel* returns us to the narrative flow that preceded them, namely the construction of the *mishkan*. Moshe instructs the people briefly regarding shabbat observance and then launches into a detailed call for donations to the communal building project:

(4) Moses said further to the whole community of Israelites: "This is what the Lord has commanded: (5) Take from among you gifts to the Lord; every generous-hearted person [*nediv libo*] shall bring them--gifts for the Lord: gold, silver, and copper." (Exodus 25:4-5)

ד ויאמר משה אל-כל-עדת בני-ישראל לאמר זה הדיבר אשר-צוה יהוה לאמר: ה קחו מאתכם תרומה ליהוה כל נדיב לבו וביאה את תרומת יהוה זהב וכסף ונחשת: (שמות לה:ד-ה)

The list of potential gifts continues for quite a few verses.

What stands out from Moshe's call is not only its specificity regarding objects for donation, but its specificity regarding the correct spirit of donation. He invites only those who feel moved to give, presumably out of love and devotion and not mere obligation. Indeed, the phrase "*kol nediv libo*" foregrounds the heart above all. Those whose inner beings compel them to give of themselves to house God's Presence ought to do so. Voluntary acts of generosity should lay the foundation of the *mishkan*.

Moshe's call is heeded.

(21) Every man whose heart uplifted him came, and **everyone whose spirit inspired him to generosity** brought the offering of the Lord for the work of the Tent of Meeting, for all its service, and for the holy garments. (22) The men came with the women; every **generous-hearted** person brought bracelets and earrings and rings and buckles, all kinds of golden objects, and every man who waved a waving of gold to the Lord. . . (29) Every man and woman whose **heart inspired them to generosity** to bring for all the work that the Lord had commanded to make, through Moses, the children of Israel brought a **gift (or freewill offering)** for the Lord. (Exodus 35: 21-22, 29)

כא ויבאו כל-איש אשר-נשאו לבו וכל אשר נדבה רוחו אתו הביאו את-תרומת יהוה למלאכת אהל מועד ולכל-עבודתו ולבגדי הקדש: כב ויבאו האנשים על-הנשים כל נדיב לב הביאו חח ונזם וטבעת וכומז כל-כלי זהב וכל-איש אשר הניף תנופת זהב ליהוה: . . כט כל-איש ואשה אשר נדב לבם אתם להביא לכל-המלאכה אשר צוה יהוה לעשות ביד-משה הביאו בני-ישראל נדבה ליהוה:(שמות לה:כא-כב, כט)

The generous ones step forward to give and to build.

Beautiful as this gush of voluntarism is, its meaning as the anchor of the *mishkan* (as suggested by the repetition of the notion) bears exploration. Why *must* donations be animated by a certain kind of a heart? What is the significance of *nedivut* (generosity) in the construction of this structure?

The Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, offers a compelling perspective on the essential role of "generous-heartedness" at the heart of the *mishkan*.

On the verse "every generous-hearted person shall bring them--gifts for the Lord" (Ex. 35:4). The *midrash* [in Exodus

בפסוק כל נדיב לבו וביאה את תרומת ה' כו'. דאיתא במדרש מים רבים לא יוכלו לכבות כו'

Rabbah 49] quotes: "Vast floods cannot quench love, nor rivers drown it" [Song of Songs 8:7], commenting, "My children made me a sanctuary of mere skins, and I came down and dwelt among them." The point is that the love and attachment to God that the children of Israel received at Mount Sinai is live and extant for eternity. But due to sin, they could not actualize this hidden love. Therefore, after the sin [of the Golden Calf], they needed this form of generosity. For through the power of giving, generosity and longing and cleaving went from potential to actual, and they drew the *Shekhinah* down. This is why the *mishkan* is called the "Tabernacle of witness," for it testifies that the *Shekhinah* dwells with Israel. . . This testimony lasts for all generations to show that even though sin might alienate, "nothing can quench love." (Sefat Emet on Vayakhel, 1887)

האהבה כו' בני עשו לי יריעות עזים ושכנתי בתוכם כו'. והענין הוא כי האהבה והדביקות אשר קיבלו בני"י בהר סיני הוא חי וקיים לעולם. אבל ע"י החטא אינם יכולין להוציא מכח אל הפועל אהבה הגנוזה. ולכן אחר החטא הוצרכו לזו הנדבה. שבכח התרומה הזו הוציאו הנדיבות והתשוקה והדביקות מכח אל הפועל עד שהמשיכו את השכינה למטה. ולכן נק' משכן העדות שהוא עדות שהשכינה שורה בישראל. . ומלאכת המשכן הי' עדות על כל הדורות להודיע שאעפ"י שהחטא מבדיל מ"מ לא יוכל לכבות האהבה כנ"ל: (שפת אמת, פרשת ויקהל, שנת תרמ"ז)

Recognizing the juxtaposition of our *mishkan* narrative with that of the Golden Calf, the Sefat Emet suggests that we read the two stories together. The idolatrous catastrophe at the foot of Mt. Sinai was not erased with pronouncements of divine forgiveness or Moshe's emergence with two new tablets. The relationship between God and the Jewish people, so new and precarious even without this drama, suffered a tremendous rupture in its wake. But it was not God who needed coaxing back into the relationship, says the Sefat Emet. It was *B'nei Yisrael*. Though God never ceased to love them, even in the face of grave sin, they ceased to believe that they could be loved. This feeling of unworthiness was the lasting effect of their initial betrayal.

In a most counter-intuitive yet empirically effective move, God addresses the people's sense of their inadequacy by inviting them, through Moshe, to experience their adequacy. And He does so through a call to service in the *mishkan*. Give of yourself. Get out of your own way, your own narrative of shame and insufficiency. Open yourself to something larger than yourself. Be a *nadiv lev*. Offer your heart generously to someone else or something else. Give out love and you will find within yourself a new way to receive love. For in the words of the *Orchot Tzadikim*,

There is nothing in this world that brings a person to love of (or from) from the world like generosity. (*Orchot Tzadikim*, The Gate of Generosity, Gate 1)

אין דבר בעולם המביא את האדם לידי אהבת העולם כמו הנדיבות. (אורחות צדיקים, שער הנדיבות, שער א)

And nothing that renders a person more available to love from God.

The centrality of *nedivut* in the *mishkan*--that meeting place of God and human beings-- stands as testimony for all time that generosity of the heart has the power to heal the heart.



*Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler is the Director of Spiritual Development at Yeshivat Maharat, where she teaches Chassidut and Pastoral Torah. She is also a faculty fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. She earned her PhD and MA from the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought and her BA from Harvard University. In 2018 she received semikha from Maharat's Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track.*