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Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei: Indiscriminate Generosity

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Parshat Vayakhel-Pikudei is a fundraiser's dream. It contains "the most effective capital campaign in history."¹ Moshe puts out the call in Exodus 35:5, "Take from yourselves an offering to God, all who are generous of heart should bring the offering of God." He lists the specific items that he is looking to have donated to the Tabernacle (gold, silver, precious stones, etc) and immediately the people go and bring all of them. They also donate their skills, spinning the threads for the beautiful fabrics and constructing all of the Tabernacle's components. The people are so alacritous and munificent in their giving that Moshe is told:

The people are bringing too much for all of the labor, the work that God has commanded to do. (Exodus 36:5)

...מְרַבִּים הָעַם לְהִבְיֵא מִדֵּי הָעֵבֶדָה לְמִלְאכָה אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתָהּ. (שְׁמוֹת לוֹ:ה)

Moshe then sends out a second call asking the people to cease their donations. This is an extraordinary turn of events. Israel's generosity is extreme, immediate, and almost overwhelming. Their actions would stand as a high point in our people's history were it not for an unfortunate resemblance to an episode in last week's parsha. Back in Exodus 32 there was a different capital campaign. Aaron had taken up a collection for gold with which to craft the golden calf and the people responded quickly, handing over their personal jewelry. Indeed Midrash Tanchuma 19 relates that Aaron had counted on the gold-gathering taking longer such that Moshe would return before the calf would be built, but Israel surprised him with their speedy donations.

In light of Exodus 32, Israel's generosity in our parsha becomes suspicious. Perhaps they are not joyfully serving God with all of their possessions. Maybe they are just general spendthrifts. A midrash in Shmot Rabbah 51:8 compares Israel to a young man visiting a city. Charity collectors see him and ask him to donate and he gives so generously that they say, "it is enough." The same young man then comes upon people collecting for a theater² who ask him to donate. He again gives so generously that they too say, "it is enough." The midrash explains:

And so too Israel gave money to the calf until he said, "enough" and they donated money to the Tabernacle until he said, "enough."

כִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל נָתַן זֶהב לְעַגְל עַד שֶׁאָמַר לָהֶם דִּי וּנְדָבוּ זֶהב לְמִשְׁכַּן עַד שֶׁאָמַר לָהֶם דִּי.

Like the young man, Israel's giving is not an expression of deeply held values. It is an indiscriminate largesse. This knee-jerk generosity is understood by the midrash to be meaningless, one set of donations undermining the value of the other.

¹ Rae Ringel described it this way at a Wexner Institute in February 2015.

² From the midrash's perspective a theater was a site of heathen amoral entertainment.

In the midrash, God comes to Israel's rescue and declares, "Let the money for the Tabernacle atone for the money for the calf!" God chooses to understand Israel's donations in our parsha as redemptive. By having the young man in the parable first donate to a charity and then to a theater, the midrash presents his behavior, and by extension Israel's, as random and undirected. It is only through God's interpretive stance that Israel's generosity is restored as a virtue and considered an atonement.

It is also significant that in the building of the Tabernacle, which is often described as מלאכה (work), there is a point at which sufficient valuables have been amassed and later in Exodus 39:43 a point at which the work of building the Tabernacle is finished. This is in marked contrast to the עבודה (labor) that Israel was forced to do in Egypt. Pharaoh's work was never complete. Indeed the goal was not to produce particular buildings³ but to beat Israel down and diminish them (Exodus 1:9-10). The building of the Tabernacle has purpose and end goals. It is built by those who freely undertake to participate and it is made from goods that are freely gifted. The people of Israel give abundantly and God, in an act of Divine generosity, chooses to understand their giving in the best way.

As we enter this Shabbat, may we be generous with our possessions as Israel was, and may we strive to be like God and be generous as well in our judgements of others.



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³ Rabbi David Silber points out that when Pharaoh wants to punish Israel, he does not make them produce more bricks. Instead he takes away the straw (Exodus 5:7-8) because he does not actually care about the quantity of bricks produced.