



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Ki Tisa 5770

By Aviva Presser Aiden

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The detailed description of the building and consecration of the Tabernacle, which spans several *parshiot*, is framed by a pair of financial appeals. The opening appeal, in *Parshat Terumah*, speaks to the generosity of the people—“Take for Me contributions from those whose heart moves them...”¹ Chapters later, in *Parshat Ki Tisa*, the description closes with the injunction that every member of the community over the age of 20 donate a half-shekel annually, in order to pay for the ongoing service in the Tabernacle.

In contrast to the initial appeal, this ‘donation’ was more similar to an annual tax than a charitable gift. The text describes the half-shekel donation as a contribution for service in the Tabernacle, which would include things such as the regular offerings, oil for the *menorah*, spices for the incense offering or other consumables used in the context of the regular services. The text describes the half-shekel as a ‘memento,’ a reminder for us of the giving nature of humanity.²

The need for such a reminder reflects the human tendency to give generously to a cause at first and then lose interest when it comes time to finance the often more mundane tasks associated with sustaining it. This pattern of giving appears consistently in the context of many contemporary global causes, such as in response to natural disasters like the devastating earthquake that hit Haiti on January 12, 2010. At the outset, the global response was extremely generous. U.S. aid agencies to Haiti received hundreds of millions of dollars in the days immediately following the quake. Yet less than two weeks later, donations had dwindled. As Haiti slowly slipped down the list of media headlines, and eventually off the front page altogether, people’s attention turned elsewhere, and the flood of support for Haiti slowed to a trickle that is characteristic of ‘ongoing’ world problems.³

This pattern closely mirrors the giving that took place after a tsunami decimated Indian Ocean coastal regions in 2004⁴ and after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in the summer of 2005. \$1.6 billion were donated to U.S. charities alone in the first 100 days following the tsunami,⁵ and an unprecedented \$3.3 billion were raised for the victims of Katrina.⁶

Yet this level of contribution does not last. Once the search-and-rescue teams have departed, comes the much longer-term period of recovery for the people and the places that have been touched by the tragedies. There will be many orphans in need of years of care. There will be a need for long-term medical care and counseling for people who

¹ Exodus 25:2.

² Exodus 30:16.

³ ReliefWeb. Appeals and Funding. <http://ocha.unog.ch/fts/pageloader.aspx>

⁴ “Tsunami aid: Who’s giving what?” *BBC News*, 27 January 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4145259.stm>

⁵ Brown, P. and Minty, J. “Media Coverage and Charitable Giving After the 2004 Tsunami.” William Davidson Institute Working Paper, Number 855, December, 2006.

⁶ Salmon, J.L. and Smith, L. “Two-Thirds of Katrina Donations Exhausted.” *The Washington Post*, 27 February. 2006.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/26/AR2006022601383.html>

sustained life-altering injuries. Building safe homes for the millions displaced will be a decades-long endeavor. Rebuilding city infrastructure, such as hospitals and sanitation systems, will likewise happen on a timescale of years. None of these will be accomplished with a single donation; but rather, will take many years of consistent giving and effort.

The reason for this predictable pattern of failing to sustain our support over the long term is one that was well understood in the desert at Sinai. When we are newly passionate about an issue or event, we feel compelled to give—our hearts move us, to use the biblical phrasing.⁷ In a building project or crisis alike, we are moved to support the initial burst of activity demanded in the short term. But as time passes we become distracted, and on some level, forget about the need that still remains.

Without a standardized mechanism for sustained giving, such as that created by the half-shekel, we must make sure we do not forget the needs of disaster victims and others who depend on us, as soon as the media does; we must make sure we continue to support causes past the initial burst of enthusiasm. The Torah emphasizes that both kinds of giving—the large voluntary gifts at the beginning and the small consistent gifts for maintenance—are critically important, describing each of them with the same word, *terumah*—‘uplifted.’



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⁷ Exodus 25:2.

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