



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Terumah 5770

By Daniel Bloom
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In *Parshat Terumah*, Moses receives instructions for the building of the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle wherein God's presence will dwell amongst the Jewish people. The *Mishkan* does not provide for any obvious material need, nor is it a victory monument or a wonder of the world intended to evoke pride or inspiration. Rather, the *Mishkan* establishes a system that lays out demands and regulations for spiritual development, a system that persisted for centuries in the ancient Jewish kingdoms and can provide us with insights for modern nation building.

In addition to a litany of architectural requirements and building materials listed in the *parashah*, the text also makes demands upon the individuals involved in the construction. From the outset, the Torah requires that those contributing to the project have noble intentions. *Bnei Yisrael* is instructed: "Take for Me a donation; from each man whose heart makes him willing."¹

Financiers of the *Mishkan* cannot be emotionally disconnected from the enterprise, but must give out of a volunteering heart. Rashi, explaining the unusual phrase *v'yikchu li terumah* (take for Me a donation) writes, "*li: lishmi*—for Me: for my Name."² The contributions to the *Mishkan* must be given for the sake of God alone, without thought for personal benefit. The construction of the *Mishkan* requires more than the simple allocation of resources. It demands heartfelt identification with the enterprise and motivation beyond that of self interest.

Furthermore, the *Mishkan* as a system necessitates a focus on collective, rather than individual action. The *parashah*, in conveying the instructions for building the structures of the Tabernacle, generally uses the second person singular, "you shall make." It makes an exception, switching to third person plural, when commanding "*they* shall make the ark."³ The Or HaChaim, an 18th-century Moroccan commentator, picks up on this inconsistency, explaining that the *Mishkan* illustrates an individual's responsibility in the framework of the nation as a whole:

"No single individual can perform all the precepts of the Torah. For instance, a priest cannot fulfill the bestowing of the 24 priestly gifts... whilst an Israelite cannot fulfill the positive commands of the sacrifices... But, taken as a whole, the nation of Israel can keep the entire gamut of Jewish observances."⁴

These principles that informed the construction of the *Mishkan*—noble intention and collective engagement—could be well utilized in guiding a modern contribution and construction enterprise, U.S. foreign aid. We might assume that the sole purpose of U.S. foreign assistance is to fight poverty and to improve the lives of citizens of developing countries. But in fact, this noble goal is pursued together with, and often in conflict with, a second stated goal, that of "furthering America's foreign policy interests in expanding democracy and free markets."⁵ As a consequence of these competing intentions, most aid is distributed to allies in the "war on terror" and "war on drugs," while only a small portion actually supports humanitarian work.⁶

¹ Shmot 25:1-2.

² Rashi on Shmot 25:2.

³ Shmot 25:10.

⁴ Or HaChaim on Shmot 25:10.

⁵ "This is USAID." 29 April 2009. http://www.usaid.gov/about_usaid/

⁶ Bazzi, S., Herring, S. & Patrick, S. *Billions for War, Pennies for the Poor*. Center for Global Development, 2007.

Another problem prevalent in the foreign assistance community is a disconnect from the genuine needs of aid recipients. Josette Perard, director of The Lambi Fund of Haiti, a grassroots organization that works to promote sustainable livelihoods, notes that:

With large-scale foreign aid, the organizations go and say “I’ll put something there,” but maybe it’s not what the community wants. Often these million-dollar initiatives fail because they don’t involve the people in the doing of the activity.⁷

The hallmark of sponsorship of the *Mishkan*—selfless intent and engagement—is sorely missing from U.S. foreign assistance, drastically limiting its positive outcomes.

Furthermore, U.S. aid programs often implement an unsystematic ‘small circle’ approach to development, whereby a particular problem or population is addressed without taking into account the wider systems that contribute to that problem. For example, the U.S. government may send food aid to a community suffering from hunger, without also addressing the root causes of hunger, which may include a complicated set of factors including political instability, insecurity, unfair trade practices and discrimination. Unless the causes of hunger for that community are addressed in a holistic manner, sustainable food security will be difficult to achieve. Just as the Or HaChaim pointed out that the *Mishkan* depended on the interconnectedness of all members of the Israelite community, successful foreign aid requires an understanding of the connections between the numerous factors that contribute to poverty and cannot respond to these factors in isolation.

The *Mishkan* represents, in a way of speaking, God’s home in the world. We can utilize the principles behind the building of the *Mishkan* to help perfect the home that God constructed for us. When it comes to international development, we know that intention matters, as does genuine engagement with involved parties. We also know that just as it takes a nation to fulfill the Torah, it takes a wide circle of communities addressing multiple interconnected issues to build a just world. By visiting www.ajws.org/justaid you can learn more about the campaign to bring U.S. foreign assistance more in line with our sacred duty.



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⁷ AJWS. *Just Aid: Foreign Assistance Reform Special Report*, 2009.
http://ajws.org/who_we_are/publications/special_reports/foreign_assistance_reform_special_report.pdf

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