

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Terumah)

This week's byte is dedicated in memory of Mr. Ernest Kan, Eliyahu ben Moshe v'Rochel, z"l, beloved father of Susan Rotsztajn.

*As a child in Germany, Mr. Kan saw the worst that man was capable of, but chose to live life seeing instead all the beauty people could share. Among the very many special things his life represented, Mr. Kan was privileged as an adult, to return to the high school from which he was expelled (after Kristallnacht) to give the commencement address and share life lessons with the next generation of German children. He is greatly missed, and the world is a better place for his having been here....
Yehi zichro baruch (may his memory be a blessing for us all...)*

Sometimes inspiration comes in the simplest of moments, like a good cup of coffee.

In the fall of 2000, my unit was called up on special emergency orders (known as a 'Tzav Shmoneh'). I still recall the middle of the night phone call from my battalion commander telling me to get my gear together and report to our assembly point. In response to my query of when I needed to be there his response was 'I'll see you in an hour', and when I asked how long I could expect to be in for his answer was: "Ein li musag" "I have no idea"; which was a shock coming from a battalion commander.

The challenge of having your entire life turned upside down in an instant, with no time to prepare for it, is hard to describe. And this reserve duty was even more difficult as a result of how close we were to home.

Usually, the long trip to whatever hot zone we were in also gave us a chance to adjust and put home in the back pocket.

But this time, we were defending and patrolling a line that was ten minutes from home. And while it resulted in a very high motivation level, as we were protecting our homes and families, it was incredibly depressing to be dodging bullets or even stuck on patrol, with your wife and kids just ten minutes away and yet so out of reach.

I recall, about a week into it, stopping my patrol by one of our guard posts overlooking the Arab village of Chirbet Aliah (near Bethlehem) to check up on a few of my men, and listening to yet another soldier trying to understand what was going on. We both just stood rather miserably, staring out at the Arab city of Beit Lechem, contemplating the sobering thought that we were once again in uniform, without any idea of how long we were 'stuck', and considering the very real possibility of a massive armed attack against our homes and families.

Just then, the lights of a civilian car pulled up to the top of the hill. As it was nearly three in the morning, we approached the vehicle with caution, until we smelled the incredible aroma of freshly brewed coffee coming from the open car.

Josh, a good friend who had made Aliyah late enough to have missed being called up to the army, could not stand the thought of his friends up alone on patrol and decided to single-handedly bring coffee and cake to all the guard positions, a feat he repeated nearly every night for almost two months!

It is hard to describe what an impact it makes on your morale to know someone cares that much, and I can honestly say his was a tremendous contribution to the war effort....

What is the nature of giving? We normally view contributions relative to their size or based on the unique character of the particular service being offered. But sometimes, giving is not about the ‘what’ or the ‘where’, it’s really about the ‘who’.

This week’s portion, *Terumah*, begins with the notion of giving, and contributing:

G-d says to Moshe:

*“Speak to the people of Israel and let them take for me an offering (**Terumah**), from every man whose heart motivates him, take my offering (**Terumati**). And this is the offering (**Terumah**) you shall take from them: gold, silver, and copper....”* (Exodus (Shemot) 25:2-3)

What is the nature of this *Terumah*, this offering G-d is asking us for? How do you give anything, let alone a specific offering to G-d?

This week’s portion is the first in a series of five portions that deal almost exclusively with the process involved in building the *Mishkan*, the tent of meeting (the Tabernacle) which will serve as the focal point of the Jewish people and eventually will give way to the Beit HaMikdash, the holy temple in Jerusalem.

Why were the Jewish people asked to do all of this giving for a building for G-d? Why does G-d need a building?

Rashi (quoting the Jerusalem Talmud in *Shekalim* 1:1) points out that there were actually three different collections of offerings here, as denoted by the fact that the word *Terumah* (offering) is used three times in the verse above:

1. *“Ve’yikchu’ Li **Terumah**”* (take for me an offering) refers to the collection of a shekel per person which was specifically designated for the sockets or **Adanim**, (that held the boards that made up the wall of the courtyard of the Mishkan, as mentioned in Exodus 38:26).
2. *“Tikchu’ et **Terumati**”* (take my offering) refers to the shekel per person collected for the public sacrifices (as mentioned in Exodus 30:15).
3. *“**Ha’Terumah**”* (the offering) which is what our portion here is referring to, was a general collection of various materials such as gold, silver, copper and a list of thirteen items mentioned at the beginning of this week’s portion, appropriately named *Terumah*.

But why is there a necessity for three separate collections? Why couldn’t Moshe have collected all of them at one time?

And why mention three different offerings and yet only delineate what one of them was in the verse?

Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson (the late **Lubavitcher Rebbe** of blessed memory) suggests the idea that building the *Mishkan* is really an allegory for how we are meant to build the world, and as such, these three different offerings represent the three different areas in which we interact with and contribute to the world.

The first offering represents Torah, which is the basis for everything. It would be hard to imagine that G-d created us for no reason, so G-d has to, at some point, clarify what that reason, or purpose, really is. This revelation, where G-d reveals the purpose of everything, in Judaism is called Torah. The Torah is essentially the blueprint for life and living. Which is why it is an offering specifically designated for the *Adanim*, or sockets, on which the entire wall's foundation rests.

This offering then, represents all those aspects of life that we are meant purely to receive, but not necessarily to change.

And then there is the second offering, which represents service to Hashem, or prayer. Essentially, where the Torah is about what G-d wants us to do, prayer is about what we *want* to do, in an attempt to give back to G-d. This does not mean to say that G-d needs what we have to give, but rather, we need to be in the process of giving to G-d.

Often, people presume that prayer is about asking G-d for the things I want, but in truth, Jewish prayer is much more about understanding the things I *could* want, and if what we want is a function of who we are, then this process becomes all about discovering what I have to give back to G-d.

Hence, the particular *Terumah* (offering) referred to here is the offering for the sacrifices, upon which our prayers are based (see Talmud *Berachot* 26a). Ultimately the sacrifice represents what I have to offer (or give back) in this world. Indeed, it is precisely the ability to recognize even the animal side of myself and how it too can be harnessed to bring peace and ethics into the world that is the root of both the sacrifices, as well as *Tefillah* (prayer) itself.

And the last *Terumah*, (offering) which represents loving-kindness or *Chesed*, are the things that become the vehicles for having such an impact in this world: the gold, and silver and tangible items with which we impact the world around us. This is the offering of all the physical actions and mitzvot with which we impact the world.

The first two offerings, representing Torah and *Avodah* (Torah study and prayer or service to G-d), are basically opportunities for us to develop ourselves and our relationship with G-d. It is only with the third offering that we actually impact the physical world both in terms of objects (represented by the gold and silver) as well as the people around us.

Which brings us full circle to this week's portion: If indeed, these three separate *Terumot* represent the essence of Judaism and three pillars of how we achieve our purpose in the world, then why are the first two (Torah and service, or prayer) alluded to, while it is only the third, representing action and mitzvot that is delineated?

Torah is the recipe given us by G-d to figure out what we are doing here.

And prayer challenges me to become a different, and even a better person.

The study of Torah can teach me the objective value of peace, and give me the objective definition of when it is a time for peace, and when it is a time for war; the Torah can even teach us what type of peace inevitably leads to war, and what type of war creates the space for peace, and how I could achieve it. But it is the experience of prayer that measures whether I really want it.

Just because I have discovered what ethical behavior is, does not necessarily mean I yearn for it. And the first stage of changing the world is developing the *desire* to change the world.

But this is not enough. A person can live a life immersed in the study of Torah and the experience of prayer. Such a person can develop a deep and powerful relationship with G-d, and amass incredible volumes of knowledge and understanding into the way G-d runs the world. But until these achievements impact the world beyond one's own self, they fall far short of what Judaism is all about.

At the end of the day, the Torah here alludes to all three of these offerings, to make clear that without any one of these, there is something missing in who we are and how we could make a difference in the world. At the same time, it is only the third offering, representing the actions that I actually do, which impact the world around me, that is spelled out here, perhaps because we need to remember that this is actually the goal.

The goal in building a tabernacle (*Mishkan*) is not to leave the world, for a monastic life up high, but to make it better from the ground up.

The purpose of building a Temple was never about leaving the world behind; it was always about a partnership with G-d to create a better world. And while it is only through a synthesis of these three areas that we can truly achieve this, this week's portion comes to remind us of the importance of recognizing the difference between the process and the goal itself.

Shabbat Shalom,

Binny Freedman