

T'rumah – 5782

Va'yidaber Adonai el Moshe Leymor. Dabar el b'nai Yisrael Vayichu li trumah.
And HaShem said to Moses, tell the Children of Israel to bring me gifts.

These are the words that begin our parsha this week. Now that the Ten Commandments have been given at Sinai, much of the rest of the book of Exodus is devoted to the specifics of the building of the Mishkan or temple that was to house the holy stones and to be used as a symbol of the presence of HaShem amongst the people. The gifts that were to be brought of course were the spoils taken from Egypt during the exodus itself. But in keeping with the idea that much of our existence as a people is meant to mimic the same events in the Torah – the exodus and the giving of the Ten Commandments, what are we expected to bring in lieu of that which was brought from Egypt. Naturally, the rabbis leap to fill in the question with an answer. In this case, the gifts were of holy deeds, holy time, and holy space. Amazingly enough, our people through their entire existence have done exactly that time and time again, wherever they have found themselves.

In temple times, holy deeds were almost exclusively the giving of sacrifices at the temple, but they also included all the specific expectations of the people in the manner in which they carried out their daily lives under within a society and polity with the priests at its centre. Once the temple was destroyed, the sages learned how to substitute prayer for sacrifice and the holiness extended to acts of loving kindness. Wherever our forefathers found themselves, they established a Chevra Kaddish, a kehillah or congregation, and performed gemilut chasadim. Think about what has always happened when a member of our community died. Immediately we gather round the mourners and help them deal with death. We shelter them, feed them, commiserate with them, comfort them, make a minyan so that they can recite the kaddish. In our own day, we have a chessed committee that fulfills this ancient function of the gift of holy deeds extended to the other.

For 2500 years, we have, as a people, observed the important rites and seasons on our calendar. We circumcise our males on the eighth day after birth. We buy back

our first born from the Cohanim understanding that we thereby fulfill the gift of giving the first born of man or beast or plant. We light candles and bless the Sabbath which Abraham Joshua Heschel reminded a modern world creates a temple in time. We ready our houses for Passover and even in the 21st Century, even the most unaffiliated of us gathers with family to observe the Seder. Listening to the blowing of the shofar required parents to run downstairs to retrieve their bored children running around aimlessly and catching up with their friends. Participating in the Yizkor service on Yom Kippur ensured the moment of greatest attendance in synagogue. Fasting of Yom Kippur remains part of the mandatory observances even among those who refuse even to belong to a synagogue. All of these represent gifts of we have given during sacred moments in time.

Finally, since the destruction of the first temple when places of worship came to signify the holiness of the temple that we were commanded to build as per the instructions beginning in this week's parsha, wherever our people existed in Galut, in exile from Jerusalem, our forebearers extending back further than even records exist as testament, synagogues were built to create that holy space the Mishkan was meant to be. Ironically, this week, bideeyuk, as the Israelis would say, precisely in translation, I finally found the dates I have been looking for that marked the building of our own B'nai Israel synagogue.

In 1902 at the home of the Zalavinskys who were among the original settlers, the gathered Jewish families organized themselves into a Kehilla, a congregation they called B'nai Israel. They had been gathering in each other's homes to daven and that continued until 1917. In that year, they bought a house at the corner of Calvin and Church Street that they used as their synagogue. The owner would not sell to Jews, so Jacob Cooperman had to ask a close non-Jewish friend to buy the house for them and then redeed it to the community. However, by 1923, it was obvious that they needed more space, so they determined to build the current structure. The house was moved back down along Calvin Street where a basement had been dug and the structure relocated above it. They engaged a local architectural firm to design the structure and in June 1924 construction began. The new building was ready weeks before the High Holy Days in 1925.

No one ever comes into our building without commenting on its beauty and constructed by some 35 families by 1925, it can seat 330 comfortably when chairs are

put in the aisles. What a remarkable gift this was, in keeping with the words that opened this week's parsha. The rabbis commented on what constitutes a fitting gift to be made to a community since the implication was that gifting would be necessary down through the ages. Anything that came as a result of one's own hard work and freely given was and still is a Terumah in the eyes of the sages. It is difficult in our time to imagine how hard life must have been for my zayde and his cohort of settlers and their families. Not more than 20 years past their arrival in the New World usually penniless and this is what they gave.

Now it is our turn to ask ourselves what gifts of deeds, time, and space we are prepared to offer up as we look to the future generations.