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Bronfman Torah: commentary on the Torah that draws on the lives, skills, and insights of our community

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What Counts as Tzedakah?

Lisa Exler '95 | Bronfman Torah | Terumah 2017

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What counts as tzedakah? Is supporting the ACLU the same as giving to a person begging on the street? Is paying synagogue membership as important as donating to a food pantry? These are questions that I've grappled with professionally as I designed [curricula](#) and [learning resources](#) for children and adults to investigate tzedakah more deeply.

These are also not theoretical questions in my family. Several years ago, when my spouse and I decided to take our tzedakah-giving more seriously, we had an extended conversation about how much (or little) of our tzedakah to direct towards supporting communal institutions as opposed to alleviating poverty. Although we both thought about tzedakah primarily in terms of poverty relief, we noticed that a significant percentage of our giving was actually supporting organizations that had little to do with alleviating poverty or addressing its systemic causes. Instead, we were giving to our alma maters, our synagogue, and to organizations like Pardes and Limmud that promote Jewish learning. While we didn't drop these institutions altogether, we did shift our priorities. We increased our giving to fight poverty and address systemic injustice in our local community, globally and in Israel, and we

decreased our giving to communal institutions from 25% of our overall giving to 15%. Parashat Terumah, however, offers a perspective on the importance of giving to support communal institutions.

Parashat Terumah begins an extended description of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle that served as the central communal institution for the Israelites during their journey through the desert. The very first instruction for this project concerns how all of the materials to build the Mishkan are to be collected. God instructs Moshe to invite the Israelites to make donations (Exodus 25:2):

דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִקְחוּ־לִי תְרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְבְּנֵהוּ לְבֹהַב תִּקְחוּ אֶת־תְּרוּמָתִי:

Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves them.

The lack of specificity around these donations is striking. The donation itself is voluntary—“from every person whose heart so moves them,” there is no amount suggested and a list of over a dozen different materials to choose from is provided. This is in sharp contrast to the rest of the instructions surrounding the building of the Mishkan in which precise dimensions and materials were prescribed for every vessel, curtain and socket. In fact, God seems to show Moshe the exact blueprint for the Mishkan and all of its vessels (Exodus 25:9), leaving nothing to chance.

Given the magnitude of this project and all of its specific requirements, why allow the materials to be collected in such a haphazard way? A midrash from Midrash HaGadol, a 14th-century collection of midrashim, offers an answer to this question that highlights the importance of communal participation in the project.

אמר ר' שמואל כשבא משה אצל ישראל ואמר להן אמר לי הקב"ה עשו לי מקדש, אמרו לו הנשיאים אנו משלנו נעשה המשכן, אמר להן משה לא צוני הקב"ה אלא דבר אל בני ישראל ויקחו . . . מאת כל איש

Rabbi Shmuel said: When Moshe came to Israel and said to them, “The Holy Blessed One told me, ‘Make for me a sanctuary,’” the princes said to him, “We will make the sanctuary ourselves.” Moshe said to them, “The Holy Blessed One specifically commanded me: Speak to the Israelites and have each person bring [a donation for God.]”

The communal institution of the Mishkan needed to be constructed through the participation of the broader community. But not only that, each Israelite had to feel personal investment and ownership of the Mishkan. By leaving open the choice of what to contribute, God was inviting the Israelites to participate in a reflective process, to ask themselves, “What material should I contribute? How would I like to represent myself in this communal space?” And the Mishkan itself, with its beautiful range of colors and materials, served as a visual representation of the diversity of the Israelite community.

Today, while alleviating poverty seems more pressing than ever, so does the project of building and maintaining communal institutions. Many of us are considering how we can be more active in shaping our communal institutions, be they synagogues, schools, social service agencies, Jewish federations, government, or advocacy organizations. (I literally took a break from writing this piece to participate in the BronfTalk Active Citizenship Training led by Anya Kamenetz on Tuesday evening!) We are evaluating how much time, money, talent and energy we want to direct towards the many things we care about.

As we do so, I want to offer two lessons from Parashat Terumah:

1. Communal institutions need our involvement and support. Whether we consider our donations of money or time to be “tzedakah” or not, we should be considering what our unique gifts are that we can bring to our communities.
2. Our communal institutions are stronger when they include the voices of many. This means that not only do we have a responsibility to participate ourselves, but we also have a responsibility to work to ensure that others can participate as well.

When, like the Mishkan, our communal institutions reflect the diversity of our communities, then, וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכְכֶם – God will dwell in our midst.

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