



**Parashat Terumah**  
**A Mandatory Donation**

by David Katzenelson on Friday February 19, 2010

5 Adar 5770

Exodus 25:1 - 27:19

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Tell the Israelite people to bring me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him. And these are the gifts that you shall accept from them: gold, silver, and copper: blue, purple and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats' hair: tanned ram skins, dolphin skins, and acacia woods; oil for lighting, spices for the anointing oil and for the aromatic incense; lapis lazuli and other stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece. And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them. Exactly as I show you-the pattern of the Tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings-so shall you make it" (Exodus 25:1-9, JPS translation)

This passage opens our *parasha*. I have always found this passage quite difficult and confusing.

Looking at various translations I find that I am not alone. If we look, for example, at the Hebrew word *terumah*, translated by JPS as "gift", the Stone edition translates it as "portion", the Soncino *humash* calls it "offering" and on the Chabad homepage I found it translated once as "offering" and another time as "uplifting". In modern Hebrew *terumah* means "donation".

So what is this *terumah*? On one hand G-d demands it "tell the Israelites to bring me", leaving little room to say no. There is also a very detailed list of what can be given, so the individual is not free to decide what to give. On the other hand, the *terumah* is collected "from every person whose heart so moves him" meaning that the act of giving is a voluntary one and no one can judge those who do not give. The list of acceptable donations is very long, enabling the individual a certain freedom of choice. So is this a donation or a mandatory tax?

A deeper analysis makes the matter even more confusing. Both taxes and donations are given to institutions made by humans – the state, a synagogue, a charity, etc. But here the *terumah* is given directly to G-d. Does the Master of the Universe really need these worldly riches? He or she has created them and could create more if they were lacking.

The purpose of the *terumah* is also obscure. "And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." All of this so that G-d may dwell among the people? The Omnipresent,



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who is in the Heavens and in the Earth, needs us to build him a house? This just doesn't make sense.

To me, it seems the answer lies, as it does many other places in the Torah, not with the needs of G-d, but within the needs of humans. G-d does not need a physical sanctuary as a dwelling, but the sanctuary enables us to feel and know that G-d dwells among us.

Ok, so we need the sanctuary, not G-d. So Moses and Aaron can build a tent, place the holy tablets in a nice box and let Miriam dance there. Why bother the whole people with a *terumah*? And what is the *terumah* anyway?

It is not only Moses Aaron and Miriam who need to feel that G-d dwells among them. All the people need to feel that G-d dwells among them. In Judaism, G-d dwells in a community. So the people need a community, not only one family of leaders.

A community can give a lot to its members. But a community is dependent on the members giving something to it. Most communities have some sort of required payment. But that is rarely enough. A community whose members pay membership fees, go to services, lessons or events, but to not give of themselves will ultimately collapse, leaving members unsatisfied and lacking. We have to give more than the minimal required.

This is the *terumah*. It is something we have to give in order to have the community, religious, and spiritual life we want to have. It is a voluntary donation, a gift and an offering of something that is dear to our hearts, our portion in the whole of the community and an uplifting of our spiritual life. Yes, it is voluntary, but without giving it we will not have the life we want. The borders between voluntary and mandatory are not as clear as one would think.

What exactly it is we must give as our *terumah* depends not only on what we want and are able to give, but also on the needs of our communities. Sometimes we may be called upon to donate money or objects. Other times there may be need for a volunteer to help lead services, to head a *parasha* discussion, or to organize an event for the elderly. Just like G-d in our *parasha*, reality may dictate a list of donations that may not include our first choice, but the list is usually long enough for us to find something we can give willingly.

What does the GLBT Jewish community need of us? The list is long. It needs some of us to openly be who we are within the Jewish and GLBT communities and take up a struggle for our weaker brothers and sisters. There is a need for people able to listen and give empathy, patience and maybe even a temporary home. Others can help by organizing events and gatherings. We need also visible role models of different types, spokesmen who will make us more visible outwards and speakers who will participate in internal debates.



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There are many ways to do these things. Personally, I have found that setting off time once in a while to write a Torah Queery is a good way to donate to the community and to enrich my own spiritual and religious life. It may not be right for everyone, but there is always a need for new voices.



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