

Time or Money: The Greater Gift

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Two weeks ago, our Torah portion included the Ten Commandments. Last week, we read a selection filled with laws that follow up on the “big ten.” What comes next? It’s the building fund, of course. Nobody involved in Jewish life should be surprised.

Even before Moses even comes down from Mount Sinai, while the carvings of the two great tablets are fresh, God commands Moses to conduct a capital campaign. A Tabernacle is to be built. The Israelites require a depository for the tablets and a house of worship to carry with them in the desert. As Carol read, the Divine instructions for that early building fund are specific, right down to the details of the gifts to be solicited. Only the naming opportunities are absent: you know, the Levy Sanctuary, the Reuben Ark, the Joseph Menorah, and so on.

Tomorrow’s *Haftarah* reading, the selection from the prophetic section of the Bible, focuses on a similar theme. Now, King Solomon seeks to build the great

Temple in Jerusalem. Instead of a campaign for material contributions, though, Solomon needs workers. He employs his Israelite subjects as forced laborers. As unpaid recruits, working for a holy purpose, we may call them “volunteers.”

Truthfully, participation in Moses’ desert donor drive might not be any more optional than employment in Solomon’s labor force. Yes, the contributions are to be accepted from anybody “whose heart so moves.” However, individual autonomy was a concept unknown to our ancient ancestors. Choosing not to give was tantamount to removing one’s self from the community. Isolation would not be a good idea in the middle of the desert.

These biblical examples accurately illustrate the traditional Jewish attitude toward giving, both of money and of time. Each is a *mitzvah*. A *mitzvah* is a commandment, not just a “good deed,” as many of us were taught years ago. As Jews, we are required to offer *tzedakah*, righteous acts of material giving to the needy and to the community, ever since that first building campaign at Sinai. At the same time, each of us is registered for the draft, as it were. All are conscripted

when our community requires our time, expertise and energy, as we have been since our ancestors served under Solomon.

In our own day, though, a more popular idea is that giving ought to be a matter of choice. The word “charity” suggests caring, not commandment. Some would say that a donation is more praiseworthy when it comes from the goodness of the heart, not out of any sense of obligation. A volunteer effort is often considered more laudable if it is engendered by desire, rather than by requirement.

To be sure, we are not expected to applaud the payment of taxes, since one who evades that requirement risks fine or imprisonment. Similarly unpraiseworthy are those who give of their time and money, only to achieve social stature or advantage in business.

However, the performance of a *mitzvah* is an obligation of an entirely different character. Providing service to God, our reward is less discernable, and rarely immediate. Though our community may impose consequences if we fail to

give, those disabilities are relatively intangible. Giving time or money in response to Divine command is a unique hybrid of obligation and free-will offering. We freely choose to submit ourselves to the requirements of our God.

While the dictates of our hearts may change, the commandments of our God are constant. We can never falter in our contributions of time and of money, if we view those gifts as *mitzvot*, as obligations to our Creator.

What, then, does our God want most, our time or our money? The messages of this week's Torah and *Haftarah* readings seem to conflict, one calling for material donations and the other for volunteerism.

A simple answer may be that each of us should give whatever we are best equipped to offer. Those who are endowed with time and talents would be called upon to volunteer; those with abundant financial resources, required to donate.

That solution, though, poses two problems. First, it excuses the wealthy from participation in community endeavors. We need look no further than twentieth century American history to discern the consequences of that

distinction. During World War II, Americans of every economic level fought and died in the epic struggle for freedom. That cause united our nation. By contrast, the Viet Nam War period draft offered exceptions that were most useful to wealthier Americans, and our nation was divided. More recently, an all-volunteer force, made up primarily of people of lesser wealth, has defended our nation in the Middle East. Morally, conscripts for any community endeavor must come from all levels of society, the rich as well as those of more modest means.

At the same time, funds cannot be raised only from the rich. God tells Moses to accept a wide variety of gifts for the building of the Tabernacle. Some are precious metals, which only the wealthy could offer. Others are more common, and could be given by anybody. Rich and poor alike could contribute to that building campaign, and could later be unified under the one worship tent that belonged to them all.

Perhaps this week's scriptural readings point to a better method of determining whether giving time or offering money is the greater Jewish value.

God tells Moses to ask for material goods. Solomon requires people's time. In each case, the circumstances determine what is needed most. Moses' desert wanderers have plenty of time, but must give of their precious resources if the Tabernacle is to be built. Solomon possesses great riches, but requires the people's efforts to construct the Temple. The greatest gift, then, may be to offer whatever is otherwise lacking.

Judaism does not establish a fixed hierarchy that places giving time over giving money, or that values financial contributions over volunteerism. Both are necessary in order to maintain a viable community, to care for the needy, and to respond to calamity. Both are supported by this week's offerings from Scripture. Both time and money are required of a Jew who would fulfill the commands of our God.

Let even the most generous financial donor also volunteer in our community.

May even the most devoted volunteer also contribute when funds are needed.

Then may all of our gifts be pleasing in the sight of the Lord, as we fulfill our obligations to God.

Amen.