

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps

Torah Portion: *Terumah*

WORKING TOGETHER ON A PLACE FOR GOD'S PRESENCE

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: בְּדַבַּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ־לִי תְרוּמָה
מֵאֵת כָּל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְבְּנוּ לִבּוֹ תִקְחוּ אֶת־תְּרוּמָתִי:

And God spoke to Moses, saying: "Tell the children of Israel to bring me an offering; you shall accept offerings for me from every person whose heart moves them [to give]."

[Exodus 25:1-2]

AVODAH COMMENTARY: Around the same time that the Israelites received the Torah, they also received instructions to build a place of worship that they could carry with them in their travels. This structure is called the *mishkan* in Hebrew, which means the dwelling place of God's presence. God's first commandment concerning the *mishkan* was that the entire community be invited to participate in its construction.

The Torah hints in several places that the *mishkan* is not just the Israelites' local shrine, but that it stands as a symbol for the world, which we are commanded to transform into a holy place, a place of meeting between us and God. One of these hints is the fact that the *mishkan* was set up for the first time on "the first day of the first month" (Exodus 40:2), as signaling a second creation. Other clues are found in the way that distinctive words used in the creation story are repeated in the sections of the Torah that deal with the *mishkan*. From these hints and clues, later commentators understood that, despite the fact that we are no longer wandering in the desert, the passages of the Torah that describe the building of the *mishkan* can teach us important lessons about the how we can work together to build a world filled with God's presence. Here are just two examples:

1. "You shall accept contributions for me from every person whose heart so moves them [to give]." *This teaches that every person must contribute whatever is good in his or her heart. For the mishkan is built out of the goodness found in each individual, the "gold and silver and copper, the blue, purple and crimson yarns, the fine linen and goats' hair" (Exodus 25:3). Each one brings the particular good thing that he or she has to offer, in his or her particular way.* [Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav]

2. *Once Rabbi Israel Kagan, a great scholar who was also known as the Hafetz Hayyim, needed to raise funds to build a building for his yeshivah. A wealthy man came to him and said: "Rabbi! God has blessed me with riches, and I want to use my wealth to perform the great mitzvah of establishing a center of Jewish learning. Let me pay to build your yeshivah!" The Hafetz Hayyim said to him, "Sir, your intention is noble, and God will reward you for it. But, I cannot accept your offer. Building a yeshivah is a mitzvah, and everyone must have an opportunity to participate in it. We can see this from the Torah's instructions for building the mishkan. Even though, according to tradition, each one of the Israelites was wealthy enough to contribute the entire amount, God said, "You shall accept contributions for me from every person whose heart so moves them [to give]," in order to give each and every person a share in the construction of the mishkan.* [Itturei Torah, Vol. III, p. 206]

QUESTION: Why do you think the building of the *mishkan* was one of the first projects given to the Israelites on their way out of slavery in Egypt?