

Vayakhel for the Current Moment 5785

The best way of turning a diverse, disconnected group into a team is to get them to build something together. That is what Moses understood and did. He knew that if you want to build a team, create a team that builds. Team building even after a disaster like the golden calf, is neither a mystery nor a miracle. It is done by setting the group a task, on that speaks to their passions and one no subsection of the group can achieve alone. It must be constructive. Every member of the group must be able to make a unique contribution and then feel that it has been valued. Each must be able to say, with pride: I helped make this.

Similarly, the best way of strengthening relationships is to set aside dedicated time when we focus not on the pursuit of individual self interest but on the things we share, by praying together, studying Torah together, and celebrating together. Shabbat and the mishkan were the two great community-building experiences of the Israelites in the desert. (*Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth*)

And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred up. (Exodus 35:21)

This is said with reference to the wise people who did the work, for we do not find the use of this phrase “the stirring up of the heart,” in connection with those who merely brought the donations; Scripture rather mentions “generosity of heart” with reference to them. Now the reason for using such a phrase, whose heart was stirred up, is because they undertook to do the work, although there was no one amongst them who had learned these crafts from an instructor, or had trained their hands at all to do them. Rather, a person who felt in their nature that they knew how to do such skills, that person’s heart was lifted up in the ways of the Eternal to come before Moses and say to him, “I will do all that my lord speaks.” (*Ramban*)

This verse describes how “every person was lifted up by their heart” (Exodus 35:21), which the Ramban takes to mean they were inspired by a feeling of confidence—by the unshakeable conviction that they could perform this task even though they didn’t know how to. And indeed, they rose to the occasion, taught themselves the art of Mishkan making, and assembled the Mishkan in all its beauty and complexity. Their sense of self-worth and of their own limitless potential helped pull them through. (*Rabbi Warren Goldstein, Chief Rabbi of South Africa*)

The recognition of the value of volunteers is underscored in this week’s parsha, Parshat Vayakhel. The text continues the description of the construction of the Mishkan, the sacred space where God will dwell among God’s people. Many scholars have noted that, in contrast to the previous parshiyot, this week’s parsha shifts its focus from general instructions to specific implementation. Such a shift is reflected in the language describing the Israelites’

hearts. Whereas earlier in the narrative, which calls the Israelites to be materially generous (*yidvenu libo*), this week's parsha emphasizes two other characteristics of the people: *Asher nisa'o libo* (those whose heart stirred him up) and *chacham lev* (wisdom of heart). As Rabbi Shai Held notes, "While the contributors [of the Mishkan] must be 'generous of heart,' the actual builders must be 'wise of heart' (*chacham lev*). The Torah seems to go out of its way to emphasize that both the giving and the constructing must be done with 'heart'"

(Rabbi Shai Held, The Heart of Torah, Volume 1, The Jewish Publication Society, 2013, pp. 217-218).

While material generosity is critically important to the success of any major project, our parsha reminds us that it is not sufficient. Rather, the construction of sacred space needs individuals who offer a different kind of generosity as well: A generosity of presence. These people are willing to show up, roll up their sleeves, and help in any ways that they can.

(Rabbi Ilana Schacter)

Questions for discussion:

- What do your valued communities "build" together? What *should* we build together?
- When are times you've moved forward without prior experience or a confident sense of competence?
- What anxieties come up when attempting to build something when you don't know how to?
- How do you move forward and sustain action under conditions of overwhelm? How do you take care of yourself and set boundaries?
- What do we need from each other to be in this process together?