

Community

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Terumah establishes two principles that are more than just legal. The first is the obligation to give to the community. Elsewhere the Torah lays out our obligations to the poor. But communities need support and whereas much of individual obligations to others is left relatively open, when it comes to supporting the community, as here, it is defined. Not only but the Torah unusually uses the phrase "And they shall take Terumah from every person" as opposed to "Ask everyone to give." It's a bit like taxes. If you don't compel you won't get. And yet the Torah still goes on to say, "in accordance with the wishes of each person." Isn't that a contradiction? In a way it is but the idea is that even if it is an obligation it should be one that we understand and therefore give willingly. There's a lesson there for every community actually.

The second theme is the idea of a spiritual home. The Torah says, "Make a sanctuary and I (God) will dwell in them." The text does not say "I will dwell in it." Surely, they did think that God dwell in the sanctuary in terms of a concentrated, more immanent presence. God should dwell in the hearts and minds of the people, not a building.

But that is the point of a sanctuary. It must have an impact on individuals and get them to draw closer to God and Divine values, otherwise it is just a building. And of course Judaism survived after the destruction of the sanctuaries precisely because individuals, like us, kept it alive.

Religious life is a constant balance between the home and the synagogue, the private and the public. Torah requires of us to invest in both and that is why we have family meals, with blessings and celebrations at home and at the same time we come to the synagogue for services together. Sometimes the home takes priority and sometimes the community.

After the Israelites came out of Egypt they complained about the lack of water and food. This basic need seems to have overridden all the miracles that they were blessed with. Even the dramatic presence of God on Sinai could not stop the grumbling. It was only when everyone was involved in creating something, in building the Tabernacle, that there is no more mention of rebellion or dissatisfaction.

The fact is we humans need challenges and we need to be kept busy. On a personal level, we often get depressed or suffer setbacks. Complaining usually gets us nowhere. There's no point in giving up and falling into paralysis. We need to be kept busy and set targets for ourselves each day. Similarly as a community we only come together when there is a project that requires our involvement.