

The people are donating to build the Mishkan, the sanctuary in the desert. If we follow Rashi (that famous medieval commentator) they are doing this after the disaster that was the Golden Calf - impatience, idolatry, materialism, faithlessness, an utter falling away from their state at Sinai.

The people are asked to “take a *terumah*.” At the heart of the word *terumah* is the idea of setting something aside - something which, according to our commentators, nobody was to be forced to do. Rather, the *terumah* was a natural outflow of an inner emotional and spiritual state, and setting it aside was a spontaneous action.

The amazing thing is that according to the Torah, everyone fell into that state. *Terumah* is the parashah in which everyone gave.

And out of those gifts came a model that was going to endure. From the Mishkan in the desert through the first and second Temples, through our actual and virtual synagogues of today, it's clear that while material things were given, the product went far beyond the material. That change of heart created not just a building, but a community.

How did it happen?

Maybe there's a clue in the word *terumah* itself. At the heart of it is the word *rum*, which means to life up. *Ram venissa* is now Isaiah describes the Holy One - high and uplifted. To be in a state of *terumah* means to want to go beyond where we normally would, to take something and raise it up, to make it special. And then, to give it away.

The Hasid Rabbi Nachman, when he wrote about the nature of the *terumah*, taught:

Each and every one of you should bring the offering of goodness in your hearts. The mishkan was built by the good that became clear in the heart of each participant – “gold and silver and copper, blue, purple and crimson yarns, fine linen and goats’ hair.” Each and every one brought that point of goodness that was unique to them, in the particular shade and hue that was distinctly theirs.

We are nearly at the anniversary of the first COVID lockdown. How does it make us feel to notice that? Maybe we feel that it's been the longest year of our lives; maybe we can't believe that it's been a year already. As we look back over this time of disruption, how are we supposed to make sense of it, and how are we supposed to carry on?

One way might be to notice the thread of individual giving.

Because while this year has been a year of heartbreak and losses great and small, it's also been a time when we have given like never before.

It's happened at home. Parents have dug deep and stepped into being teachers, tech fixers and occasionally principals, all the while juggling their own obligations. Next door neighbors have exchanged phone numbers so as to keep track of each other, and left doorstep and mailbox gifts to raise a smile.

It's happened in the city. Community food banks and fridges¹ have popped up all over. Veterinarians, dentists and EMTs are on standby to help distribute vaccines. Business people have given, too: drink manufacturers now make hand sanitizer, and I'm thinking of our congregant Peter Seltzer who diversified into plastic screening and Meryl Zimmerman's husband Trey Rintala who, when he lost his restaurant job, began cooking from home so healthcare workers and anyone else in need had the pleasure of a really delicious meal. In New Orleans, Mardi Gras this year began with a single concept from Megan Boudreaux of the Krewe of Red Beans and Rice - that the artists who make their living designing our famous floats should still be supported. This grew into the Krewe of House Floats - the homeowners gave, the artists gave, the population gave and our city was able to hold on to this most precious aspect of its identity.

Musicians and artists have given their creativity - in this city, in this country and worldwide. And healthcare workers have given, and given, and given and our prayers will never be enough to thank them.

¹ <https://www.nolacommunityfridges.org/>

It's happened all over our Jewish communities. Messages have been chalked on doorsteps and driveways on Friday afternoons; groceries have been ferried to the homebound; the homebound have been ferried to hospital appointments; teens have offered free tech support to elders. We're glad to see that people are following Ken Klein's advice to pick up the phone and call people who have birthdays, anniversaries, yahrzeits. Our gala was...well, enough said!

Once again, we are living in a time when everyone is called upon to give - to lift up and contribute that part of ourselves that is unique. All of us will have had a moment, or more than a moment, when it felt impossible to give any more. And we reached down inside ourselves, and lifted something up, and gave it anyway.

This kind of giving has far-reaching consequences.

The Talmud teaches² that even a poor person who survives on *tzedakah* should give. This seems completely counter-intuitive - why should a person pass on *tzedakah* they have received for themselves? - until we realize that the act of giving confers dignity on the giver. It fulfills not just a physical but an internal need. It elevates the soul.

When we give, when we use our imaginations and our ingenuity to lift up something so as to give it away, we may not even notice, but we are changing. We are becoming more resourceful, more generous, more sensitive. As Elizabeth Gilbert puts it - we ourselves might be the light needed to shine in a particular darkness.

Giving of ourselves inspires and encourages others to give. When we model the benefits of generosity, we are creating ripples that spread out into the world. We are not so much giving as serving - and service is one of the pillars of community. A community that serves is a community that thrives.

² BT *Gittin* 7b

Terumah. Dignity; imagination; resourcefulness; inspiration; generosity. It's no wonder that the Mishkan project was so successful that in the end Moses had to cry, "Enough!" It didn't just create a building; it created a way of being together that has endured throughout all of our generations. And it still keeps on giving, because we do.

This pandemic is going to pass. It will probably take longer than we'd like; it will definitely leave changes behind. It will definitely need us to change in future - in our homes, in our habits, in our communities. But what's happened during this time - this time when everybody gave - this is something we should keep. The energy of *terumah* will keep our communities flourishing far into the future.

Shabbat shalom.