

## *Terumah 2018*

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 2/17/18

On the surface, the very premise of this week's Torah portion, Terumah, seems preposterous. To make a physical dwelling place for an invisible Gd seems ridiculous! Of course, I am not the first one to question this. King Solomon himself, when he inaugurated the First Temple in Jerusalem, said the same thing: "Behold the heavens and the heavens of the heavens cannot encompass You, how much less this house?" But here we are, reading the first of many descriptions of building the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, the "dwelling place of Gd." We are going to spend weeks reading about a Tabernacle we'll never see, built for a Gd who cannot be seen either. What's the point of that?!? Or, to put it another way: "What does the construction of the Mishkan add to the modern life-lessons of our People?"

I believe that first and foremost, the Mishkan comes to teach us that one of the most important ways we bring Gd into the world is through volunteering. That is among the most important messages of the Mishkan, then, and now, too. The construction of the Mishkan was not farmed out to foreign laborers. There was no one hired to do the work. The People had to do it themselves and everyone could have a part in some measure. Back then voluntarism had a profound effect on people, and it still does today. Volunteering for the Mishkan was a great way to strengthen the community whose spirits were low after years of slavery. It pushed people to meet one another and bond over a shared passion - and the same is true today. Volunteering is a great way to meet good, likeminded people. Volunteering for the Mishkan was a way that our People could share their expertise with one another. Everyone had a skill or experience from which someone else could benefit and learn. And of course the same is true today. You have something to share, and something to learn, and when you join with others who are like minded in their pursuit of a higher purpose, this flows rather naturally. People like to share what they are good at, and others benefit from watching and learning. Besides, formal classes and schools cost money, but learning from fellow volunteers is free.

Volunteering also widens your social connections; you not only meeting interesting people, you can network, too. And to top it all off, volunteering is good for your health. I already knew about the mental health benefits of volunteering. Studies have shown that volunteering helps people who donate their time feel more socially connected, thus warding off loneliness and depression. But I was surprised to learn that volunteering has positive implications that go beyond mental health. A growing body of evidence suggests that people who give their time to others might also be rewarded with better *physical* health-including lower blood pressure and a longer lifespan.

The construction of the Mishkan made voluntarism an important Jewish priority. It was the Torah's way of saying, "If you want to bring Gd and holiness into the world, volunteer. If you want to do something good for yourself, do something good for others. If you want to build a stronger community, volunteer to help others. If you want to live a good and healthy life, find ways to help others to do so." When we look at our own Jewish community here in our area we realize that there are so many who have taken this message very seriously, and there is much to be learned from our own solid core of volunteers, here in the shul, in Federation and its agencies, JNF and other Jewish organizations, and in vital non-Jewish causes, too.

So let me share with you a couple of "take-aways," lessons I have learned from observing voluntarism in our community. The first is that people who volunteer were likely to have learned that value from their parents. Parents and (grandparents, too!) who volunteer are serving as subconscious role models for their own families. This is common sense, but I'm not sure many see it that way. If you want your kids to be civically minded you have to walk the walk in a way that they can follow.

The second lesson to be learned is that our emphasizing voluntarism as a JEWISH value (a mitzvah!) strengthens Jewish identity in kids. We need to stress that volunteering is a mitzvah just like davening and keeping kosher. Voluntarism is an important factor in being and observant Jew, and if more Jewish people saw it that way we'd have more people saying, "Yes, I am an observant Jew." The causes need not be uniquely Jewish. Our responsibility is not just to our Mishkan, our own house, but to Gd's dwelling place, which is the whole earth. We are strengthening Judaism when we build a new generation of Jewish volunteers, to Jewish causes and more universal causes as well. And when we talk about voluntarism in terms of "Jewish observance," we are widening the sphere of Jewish influence in our lives, in our kids' lives, and in the world.

It is said that the most important gift a parent can give a child is the chance to give back. The name of this parsha, *Terumah* emphasizes that fact. It means, not simply a contribution, but literally something "raised up." When we give, it is not just our contribution but we who are raised up. We survive by what we are given, but we will thrive, as individuals and as a community, based on what we give.