

By Rabbi  
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## **THE RECTIFIED MISTAKE OF THE NESI'IM**

**Based on the Hashkafa of HaRav Shimon Kessin, SHLIT'A**

**In memory of**

**Eliyahu ben Yehuda – Dr. Elliot Hahn A'H**

**No'omi Malka bat Mordechai HaKohen – Naomi Weiss A'H**

We have learned that had the egel not occurred (which, along with the erev rav, will be covered next week), our history would have taken a radically different path. The Geulah would have been ushered immediately, with Moshe serving as Mashiach ben Yosef. The tafkid of that Messianic figure was to cleanse us of the zuhama that was a consequence of Adam's sin, returning us to the state of purity that existed in pre-sin Adam and Chava. Following Ma'amad Har Sinai and until the egel – "Posku zuhamoson" – zuhama and death that accompanied it were gone. The tafkid of Mashiach ben Yosef had been completed.

With the egel, everything descended, returning Bnai Yisroel to the post-sin status of Adam, with all the trials and tribulations that exist to this day. The Ramban at the beginning of Parashat Terumah and Vayakhel teaches that the purpose of the Mishkan was to duplicate the Sinai experience as we travelled through the desert on our way to Eretz HaKedoshah. As Hashem spoke to us from atop the mountain, He speaks to Moshe and by extension to Bnai Yisroel from between the Keruvim. The fire atop Har Sinai is duplicated in the Ner Tamid that burned in the Mishkan and until today, is a fixture in our Shuls. Although everything described in the two parshiyot of Terumah and Tetzaveh are a step down from the ideal – every person becoming a "Mikdash M'at" – the Mishkan, the priestly clothing and vestments still enjoyed great Kedusha and brought with them the ability to achieve a high level of Dveykut with Avinu SheBaShamayim.

In Parashas Teruma & Tetzaveh, we re-experience what may have been the greatest fund-raising project in the history of mankind. Moshe Rabbeinu called upon the people to contribute to the construction of the Mishkan, the portable "Holy Temple" that served as the central place of Jewish worship until the first Bais HaMikdash was built by Shlomo HaMelech. Not only did the people participate, they did so with such zeal that a pronouncement went out calling for a stop to the contributions. As the necessary materials were being collected for the Mishkan, the Nesi'im, the Princes of each tribe sat back and simply watched. Their attitude, at first glance seems very magnanimous. They said that at the end they would make up any shortfall in what was needed to complete this part of the process. Throughout history, thousands of charity-based projects have been undertaken without the necessary funds available to complete the task at hand. Those in charge approached the shortfall by expressing that as people saw the project progressing, those who had not yet participated would be inspired to do so. Sometimes the philosophy works, while sometimes buildings remain uncompleted for years. So too, the Nesi'im's offer to cover the shortfall appears to be remarkably charitable. Nonetheless, our Sages, across the board, condemn them for waiting till the end to participate. What was wrong with what they did?

The answer to this question must be viewed from two perspectives: The project, the Mishkan itself and the Israelite nation. When Hashem first commanded the construction of the Mishkan, He said two things: "Take for Me Terumah, an offering" (Shemos 25:2), and "Make for Me a Tabernacle that I may dwell within you" (Shemos 25:8). The message conveyed here is that this was about the people much more than the building. The Mishkan was a means to an end in achieving a higher level of spiritual connectivity ("Dveykus") between Hashem Yisborach and the people. Within the secular world, a project such as a hospital is viewed differently. Although the ultimate goal of the building is to serve as a place for sick people to be cured, people contribute exclusively to the building far more readily than to the societal goal of curing people. The building provides a dedicated setting and the equipment needed for doctors to practice the curing arts. It's a means to an end, not an end in and of itself. There is a simple proof for this. Go through Mt. Sinai Hospital on Miami Beach and throughout the complex there are hundreds of plaques acknowledging

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contributions for buildings, wings, or medical departments in memory of loved ones. No dedications are made for anything philosophical as it relates to curing the ill.

The very foundation of the Mishkan, its purpose and the ultimate goal of the structure is not for its own sake but for the people, for through the Mishkan, Hashem will dwell within *them*. As a result, the fundraising that preceded the building had to be viewed from an entirely different perspective. They were not fundraising for an edifice but for themselves. Thus, the verse speaks of not giving but actually taking for oneself. This charity is being transformed from a contribution into a spiritual investment in oneself, the opportunity to enjoy an unparalleled Aliyah in spirituality providing for greater closeness with our Heavenly Father.

With this in mind, we can understand the mistake of the Nesi'im. They looked at the project from the building perspective rather than from the national – personal perspective. They would have been great heroes when Mt. Sinai Hospital was built decades ago on Miami Beach, but here they actually damaged the process!! Let me explain. The call went out for the masses to contribute. Everyone understood the Aliyah opportunity at hand and wanted to give not until it hurt but until it felt good. So, Reuven and his wife Sarah sit down to discuss their pledge. In today's terms, they know they can afford five hundred forty dollars, but the project is of such great importance that they want to stretch their pledge to seven hundred twenty dollars. They don't know from where will come the extra funds, but they have the Emuna necessary to say, "Got tzu helfen". They agree to the larger sum and feel really great about their decision. This will bring them all the closer to Hashem Yisborach when Hashem's Presence within the Mishkan touches them.

Along come the Nesi'im and guarantee completion of the project. Reuven and Sarah are still sweating over the completion of their pledge. They think to themselves, "Good news – we can go back to our original five hundred forty-dollar pledge and, if needed they will pick up the balance". The problem is that with the discount of their pledge comes a diminishment in the attitude with which they give it. There is no way they can be near as excited with their revised commitment as they were with the original one. The compromise in the pledge manifests itself not just monetarily, but more importantly in the concept identified in the verse, "TAKE unto Me". In the process of opening a door to lessen their pledge, the Nesi'im caused them to pull back from the closeness they could have felt with Hashem Yisborach. They lowered their commitment to themselves. They didn't give less, they "took" less!!

Other than the Mishkan, I don't think there has ever been a project as focused on the people as this one was. Why?? Whether a hospital, a Shul, a Mikveh, a community center or school, it only benefits those who avail themselves of the services said institution provides. Let's face it. All of us would much rather contrib-

ute to a hospital than need one. The Mishkan was unique because just seeing it and the miracles that occurred therein inspired our entire nation to recognize Hashem's Shechina, His Divine Presence within each person, family, and tribe. *EVERYONE* looked at it and said, "My contribution helped the Shechina amongst us become a reality", and that reality allowed them to express directly to Hashem Yisborach, "Welcome to Your earthly home".

How we give Tzedaka is more important than the amount we contribute. A thorough understanding is needed of the project we're giving to and how it will impact the Jewish community. Chazal teach that one who inspires others to give has a greater reward than the person writing the check. Similarly, one whose contribution is accompanied by endearing words enhances their chesed ledger from eleven to sixteen acts of kindness. All this points to the goal of making sure we don't operate in a vacuum. The famous Mishna in the Ethics of the Fathers (4:1) defining an honored person as one who honors others is most applicable here. It's about "others", not about ourselves.

There is a famous story about HaRav Yonasan Eibeshutz, the Av Bais Din of Prague who lived between 1690 and 1764. When he was eighteen years old, the budding Godol married a woman from a wealthy family. Her father gave them a very generous check so he could focus on his learning and not worry about finances. Shortly thereafter, a church was built next door to the humble Bait Midrash in which they learned. The new structure towered above their building, rendering it visually insignificant. Reb Yonasan's chavrusa, Levi, was very offended by the structure and made it clear he intended to take revenge. Although warned not to do anything foolish, late one-night Levi climbed to the top of the church and using all of his strength disconnected the cross. As it came crashing to the ground, the noise woke up the Priests residing therein. They trapped Levi in a corner, after which they arrested him. He was tried, found guilty and sentenced to death.

The community and Reb Yonasan had to act. They could not sit back and witness Levi's death. It was known that the guard standing watch over the Church prison could be bribed. After Reb Yonasan made known his desire to redeem Levi from prison to save his life, the guard made it clear that for a large sum of money Levi's life could be bought. Levi would have to permanently leave the city and never be seen again. Unbeknown to his wife, Reb Yonasan decided that the money he and his wife received for their wedding would be used to bribe the guard. Leaders of the community came to Reb Yonasan with a large sum of money collected to aid in the release of Levi. Reb Yonasan advised them that he had all the money needed to free Levi. They should save theirs for another occasion. The exchange was made, Levi was freed, and he disappeared.

The next morning, the Priests questioned the guard regard-

ing the whereabouts of their prisoner. He made up an elaborate story of how Levi escaped, a story the Priests quickly realized was contrived. The guard knew he was in trouble, so he came to Reb Yonasan's home and gave the ransom money to his wife. He said, "I know your people are very honest. Please hold onto this for me until I return to claim it. If I don't, it's yours to keep". Shortly thereafter, the guard was killed, and his lifeless body was found in the river. When Reb Yonasan's wife shared the story with her husband, he provided her with all the details of what happened and then broke down and cried. He felt that the return of the money was Hashem's way of rejecting his Tzedaka and his efforts in the Mitzvah of pidyon shevuyim. Reb Yonasan fasted for three days hoping that someone would come to him and explain the fault in his actions. On the third night, he had a dream where it was revealed to him that the responsibility of pidyon shevuyim rests on the entire community, and he had no right to keep the Mitzvah for himself. Therefore, his money was not accepted for the Mitzvah. This was not about Reb Yonasan exclusively, but the response of the entire community.

The ultimate definition of Teshuvah is when someone has the opportunity to once again commit a sin and they pass on it,

demonstrating that they've learned from their mistake. In Para-

shas Naso, we see the Teshuva of the Nesi'im firsthand. As the Mishkan is dedicated, we see that they are the first to bring forth their pledge. Rashi (Bamidbar 7:3) quotes Rabbi Nasan and explains that at this time, the Nesi'im remembered what happened back in Parashas Terumah. Everything was contributed by the community leaving them an insignificant role in the fund-raising portion of the Mishkan. Here they took the lead and brought their pledge first.

May all of us be worthy of recognizing that, far more important than what we contribute is how we make the contribution. It's not about our checkbook but about our heart and the wellbeing of the collective whole. The fact is that everything in the checkbook was given to us by Hashem, so all we're doing is distributing what is really His. The heart behind the Tzedakah is what we can lay claim to. When Hashem Yisborach looks into it, let's make sure our motivation reflects the ideals that have marked the charitable uniqueness of our people since the days of Avrohom and Sarah.