

It is a privilege to be addressing Kehillah Shabbat, which provides the opportunity for us to demonstrate the intrinsic unity of our community, notwithstanding the diversities of age-profile, nusach, formality or informality, spirit, and even respective times of service, that characterise the various minyanim. This Kehillah Shabbat is also intended to remind ourselves of the principle that, in terms of religious vitality, a congregation is greater than the sum of its parts.... In case you're wondering how Kehillah Shabbat confirms this, well... Rashi asks that precise question!

What we can say for sure is that this coming-together does serve to fulfil the rabbinic principle, derived from Proverbs 14:28: *Berov am hadrat melekh*, "When there is a large crowd, it makes for the greater glory of the divine king." The only problem with this is that it serves as a powerful argument against having *shtibls*, and indeed alternative services within the same complex! If you were to ask me, how then we justify such services, my answer would be, 'I have no idea!' But, in hallowed rabbinic tradition, I would suggest that you consult a competent halachic authority! Obviously not one who is himself the rabbi of a *shtibl* or break-away minyan - which does tend to narrow down the field!

### **"Terumah and optional mitzvot"**

A strange aspect of the mitzvah of contributing to the *Mishkan*, the desert sanctuary, is that it was left to the good will of the individual as to whether or not he or she wished to contribute. This is unique among all the mitzvot of the Torah, which, as the term suggests, are all commands. As a project that God had initiated, to enable Him to dwell among His people, would we not have expected then, a collective, *obligatory* levy.

Now, Rashi states that, although the instruction to build the *Mishkan* appears in today's sidrah, and the episode of the Golden Calf is related only later, in the Sidrah *Ki Tissa*, yet the episode of the Golden Calf actually preceded the *Mishkan*, chronologically. That idolatrous act had destroyed the relationship between God and his people and had alienated them from their father in heaven. But the subsequent command, to build the *Mishkan*, was, in effect, a divine gesture of reconciliation, an invitation to Israel to put the past behind them and to build a home for God in their very midst, a home that - *Veshachanti betokham* – His spirit would inhabit and invigorate.

That intrinsic connection between the sin of the Golden Calf and the building of the *Mishkan* also explains why God allowed only Aaron and members of his Levite tribe to undertake administrative and spiritual duties within it. For that was the only one, of all the twelve tribes, that had not compromised its faith by worshipping the Calf.

This invitation to contribute gold, silver, brass and coloured fabrics toward the *Mishkan* was clearly more than an ordinary charitable appeal. It was an invitation to participate in a powerful affirmation of faith in God, an invitation that could not be extended to the nation at large, the majority of which was still burdened by guilt at its act of Calf idolatry and was still unable to extricate itself fully from its seductive influence.

For such people, those borrowed valuables in their possession still retained a strong association with *elohei mitzrayim*, the gods of Egypt, having been obtained from their idolatrous Egyptian neighbours. This, I suggest, is the

implication of the word veyish'alu, 'they shall "borrow" each from his Egyptian neighbour,' rather than veyikchu, 'they shall "take",' used in God's original instruction. When one 'takes' something, one psychologically absorbs it into the amorphous collective of one's possessions. When one 'borrows' something, on the other hand, one mentally ring-fences it. It always remains an essential part of the lender's property, and is identified with the usage to which he or she put it. With prophetic foresight, therefore, by instructing the Hebrews, veyish'alu, to 'borrow' those valuables from their neighbours, God was indicating that, for most of the Israelites, thoughts of idolatry would continue to invade their consciousness, and those valuables would never, in fact, lose their original idolatrous association.

It is in this sense that I render the phrase me'eit kol ish asher yidvenu libbo, not in the usual sense, but as, '[only] from those whose hearts are committed [to me] shall you receive my contribution.' In other words, only the materials collected from those who had remained aloof from Golden Calf participation, who had never entertained any belief in the efficacy of idolatry, who, having borrowed them from their idolatrous Egyptian neighbours, would never have seen them adorning those neighbours at any of their idolatrous festivals - only the spiritually unencumbered property of the faithful could become transformed and elevated into furnishings for the house of God.

We may now appreciate why those donations to the Mishkan had to have been 'optional,' on the part of those asher yidvenu libbo, who sensed that they were totally liberated from any idolatrous association.

What emerges from this is the principle that one cannot command faith, nor can one impose commitment. It is a rare commodity. Some are born with the capacity to have it, and retain it throughout their lives, some inherit it and subsequently reject it; others inherit it and lose it through external influences, while many never merit to be drawn into the magic of faith's commitment.

The Hebrew word for 'faith' is emunah, from which is derived the word amen. Like Amen, faith is a response, either to the needs and urges of one's inner psyche, or to the beliefs and values of one's upbringing. Sometimes it is a response to the circumstances of one's life and fate, or, indeed, to the persuasion and expectation of a charismatic teacher or spiritual guru.

At the end of 2004 the UJIA undertook a major sociological survey(1) to determine the nature of Jewish identity and the depth of religious and communal commitment on the part of what they termed 'moderately engaged British Jews,' such as those who connect in some way with mainstream synagogue life, who appreciate the value of a Jewish education for their or their friends' children and who are content to identify with Jewish organisations, yet who may or may not regard themselves as fully observant, and for whom Judaism is a static, rather than a dynamic, phenomenon.

One typical respondent, whom they called Rebecca, and who was involved in the running of her local cheder as a way of committing to the maintenance of her traditional attachment to Jewish life, replied as follows to the question, 'Where do God and spirituality come into your Jewish consciousness?':

“I’m more of a traditional Jew than a spiritual or questioning one: For a start, I haven’t two minutes in the day when I can sit and wonder what, where or how! I do believe there is a God, and that we’re all part of his grand plan. But that’s about as far as I’ve really thought about it.”

Many of us will recognise ourselves in Rebecca and will appreciate why the authors of the survey have called her ‘moderately engaged’. But they have also, quite rightly, identified her group as the most important one for prioritising our community’s resources; for, ‘with much room to grow as Jews, this is the group that offers the possibility of increased engagement with Jewish life.’

Friends, if the Modern-Orthodox community is able to derive any message from God’s attitude to those who wished to contribute to the Mishkan, the first synagogue in history, it nestles within the verse kol asher yidvenu libbo, ‘those whose hearts are committed’, tikchu et terumati, ‘shall make the contribution.’ The target group then, was not the elite priests or the elders or the judges; it was the simple folk, those, like Rebecca, of simple faith who couldn’t necessarily commit to the entirety of God’s law, but who nevertheless believed in God and refused to defect to any alternative set of beliefs.

The message is that one doesn’t have to be among the spiritual elite or the most observant to contribute. We simply need to love our heritage and understand the paramount importance of preserving it, intact and vibrant, for the next generation. Even if we ourselves think we have nothing to teach our children religiously, we can, perhaps, go a little further than Rebecca, and beyond merely demonstrating a committed heart, by giving our children a good Jewish education, providing inspirational religious mentors for them, and by playing a more active part in educational and communal activities. Then, hopefully, we will have no cause for regret or recriminations, but rather, in the words of the psalmist, ur’ei vanim levanekha shalom al yisrael, we will merit to see our children’s children, following in our footsteps and loyally contributing to the welfare of Am Yisrael, Amen.

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(1) Steven M Cohen & Keith Kahn-Harris (eds.), *Beyond Belonging* (UJIA Publication, September 2004), p.65.