

PARASHAS VAYAKHEL

Covering the Deficit

Conjure up this scene in your imagination. The steering committee of a prestigious charitable organization convenes a meeting of its main benefactors. A new building is needed desperately, the chairman reports, and the projected cost will run high into the millions. "Ladies and gentlemen," he declares, "your generous support has enabled us to serve the community so effectively in the past, and only your continued support will help us erect this building so that we can continue to serve the community well for many years to come."

The chairman begins to call on the assembled benefactors one by one. The contributions flow. One hundred thousand dollars. Fifty thousand. One hundred and eighty thousand. And so on.

Presently, the chairman calls the name of a famous philanthropist. The room falls instantly silent as everyone strains to hear what he will say.

Slowly, he rises to his feet and clears his throat. "Mr. Chairman, I will pass right now. But I will tell you this. Let everyone give what his heart moves him to give. Total up what you have raised and calculate the shortfall. I personally pledge to cover the deficit, no matter how large it is. Before we walk out of here today, you will have your building."

What do you think the reaction would be to such a magnanimous offer? Most probably, a standing ovation. After all, what could be better than a guarantee to cover the deficit? It is an executive director's dream.

And yet, in this week's Torah reading we find an altogether opposite view. When the Tabernacle donation of the tribal princes is mentioned, the Hebrew word for princes, *nesiim*, is spelled in a truncated form, omitting the letter *yod*. Our Sages explain that this is an indication of the Torah's displeasure with the princes.

But what did they do wrong? Surely their offer, to cover the entire deficit, was the most magnanimous of all. They actually guaranteed that there would be no shortfall in the collection. What could be better?

The commentators explain that the error of the princes was in their skewed perspective. Covering the deficit is a wonderful offer if one is concerned about the recipient. But in the case of the Tabernacle, the recipient was the Creator of the Universe. He did not need the assistance of the princes or anyone else. The commandment to donate to the Tabernacle was a singular privilege granted to the Jewish people

for their own benefit. Their gifts were meant to accomplish their own spiritual enrichment, not the Almighty's material enrichment. Had the princes truly appreciated the essence of this commandment, they would have rushed to donate as much as they could rather than sit back and offer to cover the shortfall.

In reproof, therefore, the Torah deleted the letter *yod* from the word *nesiim*, princes. The mystical teachers explain that the letter *yod* represents Hashem's immanence in all of creation. Had the princes been truly sensitive to Hashem pervasive presence, it would never have crossed their minds that He needed them to cover His deficits.

Two neighbors came to a king with similar requests. The king granted the request of the one but rejected the request of the other.

"Your majesty, if I may be so bold as to ask," said the disappointed supplicant, "why was my request rejected while my neighbor's was not? For your birthday, I gave your majesty a beautiful jewel-encrusted one-of-a-kind coach, while my neighbor only gave you a simple quilt?"

"I will explain it to you," said the king. "When your neighbor brought me his gift, I asked him, 'Why do I need another quilt?' And he replied, 'Your majesty needs nothing from me. It is I who need to give a gift to your majesty.' You, my friend, come to me as my benefactor. He comes to me as my subject. My obligation is to him."

In our own lives, we sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that our religious observances are our gift to Hashem. We've spent so much time in the synagogue, we might tell ourselves, we've prayed, we've studied and we've performed so many different commandments. What more can Hashem want from us? Haven't we given Him enough? But the truth is that Hashem doesn't really need anything from us. After all, who gained from all these things we've done, we or Hashem? It is we who are enriched by living according to the Torah values and ideals. It is we who are the recipients of the greatest gift of all.