

February 25, 2012

T'RUMAH (Offering)

The book of Exodus contains arguably the most important story in all of Jewish history. HaShem's role in freeing the Jews from Egyptian oppression and leading them to Mt. Sinai, revealing the Ten Commandments and the beginning of Jewish law constitute the very core of what it means to be Jewish.

From the very beginning, the book of Exodus is clearly a book about *chesed*. But what is *chesed*? It is often translated as "grace" - a particular kind of love that is undeserved, spontaneous, and unconditional. At other times it is translated as "loving-kindness." But for this love to be called "*chesed*," it must be given freely without having been earned. It is a rare thing in our world of flesh and blood that this pure loving-kindness is found, but there are many examples sprinkled throughout the book of Exodus. For example, the midwives who demonstrated *chesed* for the Israelite baby boys; Pharaoh's daughter who showed *chesed* when she rescued Moses from the river; Moshe's *chesed* when he saw a slave being beaten by the Egyptian task-master.

In every moment, the plot of Exodus advances because of underserved love and kindness. HaShem showed *chesed* by liberating the slaves who had done nothing to earn this special divine providence. This unearned grace continued on Mt. Sinai when HaShem was gracious enough to benefit the Israelites with the Torah and His teachings. A concrete symbol of God's *chesed* is found in this week's *parasha* in the building of the *Mishkan* - the Tabernacle. Moshe is to tell the Israelites to bring an offering to HaShem, but it is to be from those who give willingly from the heart. He instructs the Jews to build this portable structure with the offering as a place in which the Divine Presence can dwell. God provides a tangible reminder of the special grace that has brought about their liberation. He has also provided them with a path of living that is wise and harmonious, and has offered them unparalleled access to the sacred and holy. The Tabernacle that was built in the wilderness reminded our ancestors of God's unqualified love, which, in turn, stimulated them to redouble their efforts to live up to His expectations.

But how does this apply to us? By opening our hearts to God's love, we build a tabernacle of the heart. By allowing HaShem to dwell within our core, we respond to His *chesed* with love toward others. We take a portion of God's loving-kindness toward us and offer it as our own gift of love to the rest of humankind.

Hebrew - Exodus 25:1-2

English - Exodus 25:1-8

Haftarah - I Kings 6:11-14

B'rit Chadasha - 2 Corinthians 9:6-8