



## ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

### “The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

#### 22 VaYakhel —The Arts of Giving

##### שמות לה

כ וַיָּצֵאוּ כָּל-עַדְת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִלִּפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה. כָּא וַיָּבֹאוּ כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-נִשְׂאוֹ לְבוֹ נָכַל אֲשֶׁר נָדְבָה רוּחוֹ אֶת-הַבְּיָאוֹ אֶת-תְּרוּמַת יְהוָה לְמַלְאכַת אֱהֹל מוֹעֵד וְלִכְל-עֵבֶדְתּוֹ וְלִבְגְדֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ. כב וַיָּבֹאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים עַל-הַנָּשִׁים כָּל נְדִיב לֵב הַבְּיָאוֹ חָח וְנָזָם וְטַבַּעַת וְכוּמָז כָּל-כְּלֵי זָהָב וְכָל-אִישׁ הַנִּיף תְּנוּפֶת זָהָב לַיהוָה. כג וְכָל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-נִמְצָא אֹתוֹ תְּכֵלֶת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי וְשֵׁשׁ וְעִזִּים וְעֹרֹת אֵילִם מְאָדָּמִים וְעֹרֹת תְּחָשִׁים הַבְּיָאוֹ. כד כָּל-מְרִים תְּרוּמַת כֶּסֶף וְנָזָה שֵׁת הַבְּיָאוֹ אֶת תְּרוּמַת יְהוָה וְכָל אֲשֶׁר נִמְצָא אֹתוֹ עֲצֵי שִׁטִּים לְכָל-מַלְאכַת הָעֵבֶד דָּה הַבְּיָאוֹ. כה וְכָל-אִשָּׁה חַכְמַת-לֵב בְּיָדֶיהָ טוֹו וַיְבִיאוּ מְטוֹנָה אֶת-הַתְּכֵלֶת וְאֶת-הָאַרְגָּמָן אֶת-תוֹלַעַת הַשָּׁנִי וְאֶת-הַשֵּׁשׁ. כו וְכָל-הַנָּשִׁים אֲשֶׁר נָשָׂא לִבָּן אֶת תְּנָה בְּחֻקָּהָ טוֹו אֶת-הָעִזִּים. כז וְהַנְּשָׂאִים הַבְּיָאוֹ אֶת אֲבָנֵי הַשֵּׁם וְאֶת אֲבָנֵי הַמְּלָאִים לְאַפּוֹד לַחֹשֶׁן. כח וְאֶת-הַבִּשְׂמֹם וְאֶת-הַשֶּׁמֶן לְמָאוֹר וְלִשְׁמֹן הַמִּשְׁחָה וְלִקְטֹרֶת הַסַּמִּים. כט כָּל-אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר נָדַב לִבָּם אֶת־מַלְאכָה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּיַד-יִשְׂרָאֵל נָדְבָה לַיהוָה.

##### שמות לה

ח וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת הַכִּיּוֹר נְחֹשֶׁת וְאֶת נְחֹשֶׁת בְּמִרְאֵת הַצַּבָּאוֹת אֲשֶׁר צָבָאוּ פָתַח אֱהֹל מוֹעֵד.

#### Shmot 35

<sup>20</sup> So the whole community of the Israelites left Moses' presence. <sup>21</sup> And everyone who excelled in ability and everyone whose spirit moved him came, bringing to the Lord his offering for the work of the Tent of Meeting and for all its service and for the sacrificial vestments. <sup>22</sup> Men and women, all whose hearts moved them, all who would make an elevation offering of gold to the Lord, came bringing brooches, earrings, rings, and pendants — gold objects of all kinds. <sup>23</sup> And everyone who had in his possession blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats' hair, tanned ram skins, and dolphin skins, brought them; <sup>24</sup> everyone who would make gifts of silver or copper brought them as gifts for the Lord; and everyone who had in his possession acacia wood for any work of the service brought that. <sup>25</sup> And all the skilled women spun with their own hands, and brought what they had spun, in blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and in fine linen. <sup>26</sup> And all the women who excelled in that skill spun the goats' hair. <sup>27</sup> And the chieftains brought lapis lazuli and other stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece; <sup>28</sup> and spices and oil for lighting, for the anointing oil, and for the aromatic incense. <sup>29</sup> Thus the Israelites, all the men and women whose hearts moved them to bring anything for the work that the Lord, through Moses, had commanded to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to the Lord.

#### Shmot 38

<sup>8</sup> He made the laver of copper and its stand of copper, from the mirrors of the women who performed tasks/the multitudes at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.



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#### Context

Moshe gathers the entire community together. After reminding about the observance of Shabbat, Parashat Vayakhel reviews the process of collecting the materials and sets out the work specifications for constructing the *mishkan*. Moshe invites every skilled person to come forward. The People respond generously, women and men offering freely more than what is needed. Moshe appoints Bezalel, inspired with divine abilities, as the artistic project manager, to work with every kind of material involved in the creation. The text describes the craftpeople weaving the fabrics, preparing the wooden frames and the utensils, building the incense and sacrificial altars. Considerable attention is dedicated to specifying how the different elements are unified into one structure, the hooks and pegs, the posts and sockets, and the overall enclosure of the sacred space.

#### Explorations

While Parashat Terumah describes the blueprint for the *Mishkan*, Parashat Vayakhel deals with the actual construction of it. Moses instructs the Children of Israel to collect from one another voluntary donations, as God had commanded. The Torah emphasizes that both men and women give their jewelry, precious metals and stone, fine fabrics, dyes, and animal skins. One of the striking aspects of the process is how forthcoming the people are about giving. They show no reservations about pouring their gifts forth, seemingly without limit.

<sup>5</sup> "The people are bringing more than is needed for the tasks entailed in the work that the Lord has commanded to be done." <sup>6</sup> Moses thereupon had this proclamation made throughout the camp: "Let no man or woman make further effort toward gifts for the sanctuary!" So the people stopped bringing: <sup>7</sup> their efforts had been more than enough for all the tasks to be done. (Shmot 36)

This description is particularly striking when we consider the desert context. Precisely where the kinds of materials needed are so scarce and precious, where there is barely even water to drink, and scant options to replenish, the Israelites show no covetousness. The desire to give motivates them more than possessing their own wealth.

In a couple of verses, the Torah focuses on the specific gifts that women bring. Nearly all of the offerings contributed by the community are raw materials, or items that had been worked for another purpose—gold objects of all kinds, skins, silver, copper, and wood (Sh. 35:22-24). However, the yarn and fibers were not raw, nor previously prepared, but skillfully worked for their intended use in the *mishkan*.

And every woman who had wisdom of the heart in her hands wove; and they brought that which they wove of blue and purple, of scarlet and linen. And all of the women whose hearts lifted/moved them wove the goat hair. (Shmot 35:25-26)



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These verses indicate that among all of the Israelites, women in the community did the work required to transform the raw wool and dyes into fabric: sorting, washing away the oil so that it will absorb dye, drying, teasing, carding, spinning, and weaving. Motivated women fashioned their fabric donations before they brought them to the *mishkan* artisans.

The women's weavings were used for the fabric elements of the *mishkan*—curtains, coverings, and priestly clothing. All of these objects create boundaries dividing internal and external domains of the *mishkan*, inside from outside, and for enclosing the bodies of the priests.

Among the offerings, the Torah singles out the donations of another group of women, the *hosts* at the entrance to the tent of meeting. Little is known or even speculated about the women who gathered in their numbers. These women brought copper mirrors that were to be made into the laver for washing the hands of the priests before they enter the *mishkan* to perform the services.

He made the basin from copper and its stand from copper, from the mirrors of the [legions of] women who served duties at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. (Sh. 38:8)

Midrash Tanchuma, a ninth century collection, elaborates about the history of the mirrors during the Israelite enslavement in Egypt.

The women find that God has provided small fish in the basins of water they draw from the Nile. They sell a percentage of the fish - buying wine with their proceeds - and cook what remains. With fish and wine they greet their spouses in the fields. (*Pekudai* 9)

Rashi and Ramban summarize the Midrash.

When their spouses would be exhausted because of the grueling labor imposed upon them by the Egyptians, [the women] would go and take them food and drink, and feed them. Then they would take the mirrors, and each one would view herself with her spouse in the mirror, and seduce him with words, saying, 'I am more handsome than you.' In this way, they would arouse their spouses, and would have sexual relations with them. God would bestow Her/His countenance upon them and they would conceive and give birth there. . . ."

When the women offer the mirrors, Moshe angrily does not want to accept such objects of vanity for the basin at the entrance to the *mishkan*. God, however, instructs Moshe to use them,

The Holy One, Blessed is S/He, said, "Accept them, because these are the dearest to Me of all, for by means of them, the women established many legions of offspring in Egypt" (Rashi on Shemot 38:8)



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The fruitful loving between Israelite slaves reflected in copper is hammered into a washing bowl used at the entrance to the sacred domain. In this material, the vision of love in the Song of Songs is meant to be fulfilled, as it says there, “under the apple tree I aroused you” (SoS 8:5, cited by Rashi). Rashi does not suffice with the metaphoric love between God and the Jewish People that the sages traditionally attribute to the biblical love poem. He explicitly intends that the bowl function to bring peace between spouses when a man's jealousy threatens to tear a couple apart (a reference to the ritual of the “suspected adulteress,” Bamidbar 5:11-31). Ramban, on the other hand, emphasizes how the women gather en masse at Moshe's tent to pray and learn discourses on the Torah and commandments (on Sh. 38:8). In the argument between Moshe and the women, the Midrash portrays favor for an uninhibited attitude over Moshe's prudish resistance. The divine desires offerings from all aspects of peoples' embodied experience.

#### Questions for Discussion

- What motivates us to give? And what are our reservations? Discuss expectations, fears, desires, feelings and, where comfortable, financial issues and concerns that affiliate with contributing—money, time, and goods. Do you consider giving an obligation? Do you find that the desire to give comes easily to you, or is it a difficult struggle to give—to part with possessions or resources, to find the appropriate contribution, and/or to respond or offer it?
- Evaluate your experiences of giving—under what conditions do you find the experience meaningful, to whom and what kind of gifts?
- In what ways can we enhance our contributions and gifts so that they express our personal aesthetic, skills, and tastes? In what ways might personal investment in gift-giving be important, adding human value to raw materials?
- In what ways, if any, do women continue to define and occupy boundaries between internal and external, private and public spheres? Consider both material and symbolic boundaries, and how they relate to what you consider to be *sacred*.
- How does fertility and producing “multitudes” relate to your conceptions of contributions to private and public life? Contrast and compare women's and men's roles.

#### Study Links

In relation to the culture of *giving*, the native peoples of Northwestern Canada and the USA celebrated a tradition known as the “Potlatch” where people gave away their possessions, often fine artistic and valuable items. Honor accrued to those who gave the finest and most. Sometimes, the potlatch deteriorated into excess consumption and waste, and even ruined families who gave away their essential resources under the burden of social pressure. An illustrated story about how “Raven Stole Crow's Potlatch” can be downloaded [here](#).



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Early Canadian officials with their European values, including the Church, found this practice threatening to the society they were trying to create, and an indication that the natives are *unstable*. They outlawed such giving as an offence against “Christian capitalist society,” punishable by imprisonment for two to six months. The ban sought to have a *civilizing* effect. [This link](#) hints at the complicated history and conflicts involved in the practice. More thorough analysis can be found in this native perspective, Charles Hou, *To Potlatch or Not to Potlatch: An In-Depth Study of Culture-Conflict Between the B.C. Coastal Indian and the White Man* (Vancouver: British Columbia Teachers' Federation).

Watch [this short and clever film](#) about some surprising research that disproves some common assumptions about people's priorities and how motivated we are to contribute.

[This page](#) describes and illustrates the washing preparations of wool. [Here](#) is more information about spinning wool, and suggestions about natural dyes, carding by hand [here](#). There is a video of hand-spinning technique on [this site](#). [Here](#) is a (romanticized) video of most of the process from shearing to weaving.

#### Summary of Issues

Among the Israelites' generous contributions, women offer fiber gifts to the *mishkan* that involve many stages of skillful labor. The fabric and copper gifts seem to affiliate with the *liminal* zones, delimiting the boundaries, and preparing the transition to the inner sacred domain and to proliferating multitudes.

#### Methods & Observations

In this case of offerings to the *mishkan*, the entire community, women and men, feels moved and obligated to participate in the project of sacred service. The text explicitly singles out Israelite women in its descriptions, specifying two unique gifts that women offer. Though these gifts inspire affirmative midrashic commentary about gender roles—laboring, praying, and studying, they are nonetheless at the borders of the service and emphasize women's fertility. As the descriptions of the *mishkan* service progress, we will continue to observe the Torah's attention to women's roles and participation.

#### Contact

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