

## The People Step Up

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By this point in the Book of Exodus, the story outlines are probably familiar: the people—having been redeemed from Egypt and covenanted with God on Mt. Sinai, and having already sinned a terrible sin by building the Golden Calf—respond to God’s detailed instructions to build a Tabernacle by donating so generously that the collection of the material with which to construct the sanctuary has to be stopped midway, even as the people are still donating.

But to truly appreciate some of the implications of this narrative, let us go back and unpack several of the key verses. Exodus 35 begins with Moses convoking “the whole Israelite community” and passing on the detailed instructions to build the Tabernacle he had received from God. At this point the Torah records the response of the people to these commands: “So the whole community of the Israelites left Moses’ presence. 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” (Exod. 35:20–21).

The Torah goes on to relate the many gifts that the people brought with great enthusiasm, and generosity both of spirit and of material. Pausing to introduce the two “project managers,” Bezalel and Oholiab, the Torah next narrates how these two led the people in actually building the Tabernacle, “to perform expertly all the tasks connected with the service of the sanctuary,” a process that begins at Exodus 36:3 and continues to the end of this parashah and the next.

However, there is an important episode that I have left out in this account, so let us focus our attention on it:

But when these continued to bring freewill offerings to him morning after morning, all the artisans who were engaged in the tasks of the

sanctuary came, each from the task upon which he was engaged, and said to Moses, “The people are bringing more than is needed for the tasks entailed in the work that the LORD has commanded to be done.” 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: their efforts had been more than enough for all the tasks to be done. (Exod. 36:3–7)

The people’s exuberance is an important detail in a narrative already replete with them. Whereas in the narrative of the Golden Calf in last week’s portion, it was Aaron who proposed the donation of the gold, and that and the people’s acquiescence took all of two verses (Exod. 32:2–3), in this week’s portion the people seem to be spectacularly engaged and eager participants—so much so that their energy has to be restrained. As Nahmanides comments: “Scripture mentions, **the people bring much more than enough**, in order to praise the people who brought with such generosity, and to glorify the wise men for their honesty.”

Yet if we read the entire sequence that leads to this result, a curious question arises: The Torah showers such praise in detailing the dedication of the people and the way in which they take the initiative, but . . . Where were their tribal leaders? Where were the princes of the people? We know that when the Torah narrates the dedication of the Sanctuary (Num. 7), it goes out of its way to narrate the contribution of the princes in exceeding detail. But here in the construction of the Sanctuary itself, could they not have been mentioned?

Attentive close readers of course know that the princes

were, indeed, mentioned, albeit in a somewhat offhand measure (Exod. 35:27):” And the chieftains brought lapis lazuli and other stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece . . .”

Rashi, always a fine reader and never one to overlook a detail, notices that the word for “princes” in this verse **אַנְשֵׁי** is spelled with what grammarians call “defective orthography,” that is, it does not contain the letter *yod* that usually indicates a plural (thus, we would expect the word to be spelled either **אַנְשֵׁיִם** or **אַנְשֵׁיָם**, if not completely fully, **אַנְשֵׁיִם**). In this case, Rashi reads the Torah with an incorporation of a midrashic insight from Sifrei Bemidbar (7:3):

R. Nathan asked, “What reason had the princes to volunteer their contributions at the dedication of the Tabernacle (in Num. 7) at the beginning, whereas at the construction of the Tabernacle (here in Exod. 35–36) they were not the first?” (in fact they were the last to contribute!). Rather, this was how the princes reasoned: “Let the community donate what they would donate, and what will then be lacking we shall complete.” But when the community gave everything needed in its entirety (and then some!)—as it is said, *their efforts had been more than enough for all the tasks to be done* (Exod. 36:7), the princes asked, “What can we now do?” therefore: *And the chieftains brought lapis lazuli and other stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece . . .* (Exod. 35:27). That is why they were the first to contribute at the dedication of the Tabernacle (in Num. 7).

Up to this point, Rashi narrates the midrash as it has come down to us. However, he perspicaciously adds a detail on his own: “Because, however, they were lazy (or if you prefer, dilatory) at the beginning, a letter is missing here from their title: for it is written **וְהַנְּשֵׂאִים** (instead of **אַנְשֵׁיִם** or **אַנְשֵׁיָם**, i.e., as related earlier, it is normally spelled with at least one *yod* in the Hebrew Bible).”

Now, the great medieval exegete R. Abraham Ibn Ezra

famously dismissed any effort to draw conclusions from the orthography of the Hebrew Bible and regarded all such efforts as “an affair for children” (from Ibn Ezra’s *Introduction to the Torah*). But Rashi’s comment is rooted in much more than mere orthography; rather I think he correctly intuits that the princes’ reasoning, as the midrash relates it, is faulty and self-serving. They might comfort themselves that they are acting altruistically, but what they were really doing was not functioning in the way that leaders are supposed to function—by leading, and not by following. The ostensible “leaders” hesitated in this instance from performing their true and obligatory role. And the people, whether noticing the leaders’ hesitation or not, effectively bypass the leadership to accomplish the task at hand.

In fact, these past months we have seen this very social phenomenon—of leaders failing to act as leaders, and the people picking up the slack to get the job done—in the State of Israel. Leading up to and following the catastrophes and horrors of October 7, the political leadership failed miserably to live up to its obligations, mainly to protect the citizenry against attacks like the one Israel experienced from the outset, but also in failing to take responsibility for what in Hebrew is termed a **מַחְדָּל**, a “default” in carrying out the fundamental, contractual obligations of a government to protect its people from harm. And what followed the initial attack was that the people took over the responsibilities of government in virtually every sense of the word. “Start up Israel” kicked into gear at every level of society, healing the wounded, sheltering and comforting the refugees, clothing and feeding the soldiers who were belatedly protecting the nation. The energy and effectiveness of Israeli citizens in “making up” the deficiencies of their political leadership has been nothing less than inspiring. And while by no means have we arrived at the point where someone needs to tell the citizenry **וְהוֹתֵר דִּי**, “you have done enough and do not need to do more,” we may take inspiration from the reaction of Israelis to make up for the deficiencies in their leaders and accomplish what they have accomplished in these most difficult of times. Let us hope and pray that this ingenuity will help lead ultimately to making a peace with strength, and may it bring safety for all innocents.