Vayakheil - Shekalim 5776: Leave it to Me

By Rabbi Joshua (cateringly known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

The Torah relates that the men and women brought their donations to the Mishkan, including gold, silver, various materials and dyes, acacia wood, as well as other items that were necessary for its construction and the holy service done there. After mentioning the contributions of the people, the Torah then relates that the nesiim, the princes of the tribes, brought the choshen stones, and the filling stones. Although these two items were more valuable than all the other materials contributed by the people, they are mentioned last, because, as the Ohr HaChaim explains, the midrash says that they fell from the clouds, so that they were not the product of any special human effort, whereas with regard to the other materials brought by the people, the effort involved in the contributions made them dearer in God’s eyes, and they are therefore mentioned first.

Rashi cites a midrash which makes another point about the contribution of the nesiim. He says that they gave last, because they said, “Let everyone else contribute what they will, and we will bring what is lacking.” When the people finished contributing, and that work, the Torah says, was sufficient, the only items missing were the precious stones, which the nesiim brought. Because of their attitude, the Torah writes the word “nesiim” in a deficient form, without the latter “yud,” to indicate that something was missing in the way they made their contribution. One may ask, however, why that attitude was considered deficient? Doesn’t it seem like a noble gesture to offer to fill in whatever is missing for the work of the Mishkan? We have explained in the past, that a function of the contribution to the Mishkan was to give each person the opportunity to relate in a personal way to that aspect of the Mishkan to which he was spiritually most drawn. The attitude of the nesiim, therefore, missed the point, leaving it to the content of the contributions to determine what they brought, rather than making it a means of personal spiritual growth. That is why specifically the letter “yud” is missing in their title, because the letter “yud”, as my teacher Rav Aharon Soloveichik zt"l pointed out, denotes the personal element (for example, the word “shulchan”, without a “yud” at the end, means a table, while the word “shulchani”, with a yud at the end, means “my table.”).

Rav Chaim Mordechai Katz, zt”l, in his Be’eir Mechokek, says that although the nesiim’s gesture appears to have been noble, it carried the possibility of being understood as laziness, which is how the midrash describes it. Rabbi Katz cites his teacher Rav Yosef Leib Bloch, who says that the greater a person becomes, the more introspective he should be in regard to his character traits. He must constantly work on refining himself, so that there should be no trace of bad character in anything he does. The nesiim, says Rav Katz, erred in failing to search their actions properly.

We may add a further point that the attitude of “leave it to me” can be seen as a certain degree of arrogance, as if to say “I can and will do whatever you can’t.” While the nesiim could be trusted not to have felt that way, still, that attitude could be interpreted along such lines, which could lead to anger and conflict. One of the purposes of the Mishkan, as we noted in last week’s message, was to unite the people, and the nesiim, perhaps, were not sensitive to the break in unity that their attitude could possibly generate.

*Please keep Rabbi Hoffman, Yehoshua ben Yonina, in mind in your prayers, for a complete and speedy recovery, among the ill of the nation.*