

# Torah with an Occupation

## Thought for the Week:

When the people of God join together with a common goal, we can do great things. The joint effort of the people of God working together to fulfill His commandments created a spiritual house worthy of God's Dwelling Presence.

## Commentary:

And all the skillful men who were performing all the work of the sanctuary came, each from the work which he was performing. (Exodus 36:4)

The building of the Tabernacle required each person to contribute to the work from his own skill set. The tanners did the tanning, weavers did the weaving, carpenters did the carpentry, metal smiths did the smithing and so on. Each person had something to offer from his own unique vocational skills.

The Torah life is not just a life of religious rituals and scripture study. God encourages all of us to develop our own unique vocational skills so that we can each be self-sufficient and contribute to the common good of the community. Paul instructs each believer to lead a quiet life, attending to his vocation, working with his hands so that he may win the respect of those outside the community and not be dependent upon anyone.<sup>1</sup> He teaches us to find some productive field of work so that we will have adequate resources to share with others who might be in need.<sup>2</sup> These guidelines teach us that making a living is part of living out Torah. The early rabbis agreed with these sentiments. Consider the following rabbinic quotation from the Mishnah about the value of combining Torah study with an occupation:

The study of Torah is excellent when it is combined with a worldly occupation because the effort required by both keeps sin out of a person's mind. But where there is no worldly occupation the study of Torah amounts to nothing and leads to sin. Let everyone who works in the community work for the sake of the Name of Heaven. (m.*Avot* 2:2)

According to this view, a person should always combine his pursuit of spirituality with the pursuit of an income. To concentrate solely on religious matters is out of balance and will eventually lead to ruin. Instead a person should regard his job a religious duty performed for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Paul illustrated this principle in his own life by supporting himself with his work in tent making.

The building of the Tabernacle illustrates the "tent making" concept well. The combined efforts of the people of God as they labored in all their respective fields resulted in the building of God's house.

## **Middot U'Mitzvot (Character and Deeds)**

### **The Good Heart**

When Moses announced the plan to build the Tabernacle, he did not hire any fund-raising consultants. He did not need a high-pressure pledge drive. Moses asked only those with willing hearts to give to the work of the Tabernacle. The building of God's holy house was not to be sullied with contributions that had been pried loose from people who were reluctant to donate to the work. "Everyone whose heart stirred him and everyone whose spirit moved him" (Exodus 35:21) contributed freely.

There were probably many among the children of Israel who did not contribute to the work. Some had a willing heart and others did not. Those who were unwilling to give excluded themselves from the privilege of having a share in building God's house.

This story teaches us that there are two types of people, those with willing hearts and those with unwilling hearts.

Once a rabbi named Yochanon ben Zakkai (John the son of Zaccheus) asked his disciples, "What is the best kind of character that a person should try to be like?" The first of his disciples answered, "A man with a good eye." By this he meant a generous person. The second disciple answered, "A man who is a good friend." The third disciple said, "A man who is a good neighbor." The fourth disciple said, "A man who looks ahead to consider the consequences of his actions." The fifth disciple said, "A man who has a good heart." Rabbi Yochanon replied, "I like the last answer the best because it includes all the other answers."<sup>3</sup>

### **Endnotes**

1. 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12. 2. Ephesians 4:28. 3. m.*Pirkei Avot* 2:9.