

TEXT STUDY

THE UNICORN IN YOUR BACK POCKET

WHAT HIDDEN GIFTS DO WE HAVE YET TO OFFER?

TORAH BLESSING

VOICES FROM OUR TRADITION:

In her sermon, Rabbi Auerbach refers to the following verses from Exodus 25:

(1) And Adonai spoke unto Moses, saying: (2) Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him. (3) And these are the gifts that you shall accept from them: gold, and silver, and copper; (4) blue, and purple, and crimson yarns; fine linen, and goats' hair; (5) tanned ram skins, dolphin skins, and acacia-wood; (6) oil for lighting, spices for the anointing oil, and for the aromatic incense; (7) lapis lazuli, and other stones for setting, for the ephod, and for the breastplate. (8) And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them [or "in them."].

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you make of the range of gifts that is requested?
- (b) God often demands that the Israelites make offerings. What is the significance here of the fact that God demands gifts only from "every person whose heart so moves him?" Why is it important that these gifts be voluntary? What difference do you find between paying dues and making a voluntary contribution? Does the voluntary nature change your relationship to the institution?

DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

In the sermon, Rabbi Auerbach writes:

We can't always identify our gifts on our own. I'm thinking of one of our members here, Sandy, who is leading a Mussar study group this year. Sandy is a lawyer by training, and she probably could have told you before this year, that her gifts included organization and a commitment to follow through. But what we've discovered this year is that she has a gift for seeing the beauty in the souls of the people who are in her group, and in helping them to tap into their best selves. She didn't know she had *this* [holding up stuffed unicorn].

And when we think of the gifts we bring, let's not be confused and think only of our vocational skills. We are not just a community of lawyers, and teachers, and nurses and

accountants. We're a community with gifts of deep listening, of imagination and curiosity, and passion for justice. But we discover these gifts best in one another. So to find them we need to spend some time together, and then to be on the lookout for unicorns. And as it says on the subway, "If you see something, say something." Because nothing feels better than someone else pointing out a gift that you didn't know you had.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How do you usually find yourself contributing to your synagogue community? Are your contributions related to your profession? Are there other aspects of yourself that you might bring offer, or other things you love to do, that might enrich the community?
- (b) Have you identified any gifts, in yourself, or others in this group, that you did not know about before? What "unicorns" have you discovered together? Now that you have identified one another's gifts, what new possibilities do you see for enriching our community?

ANOTHER CONTEMPORARY VIEWPOINTS:

Rabbi Ellen Dreyfus writes:

Pinchas H. Peli wrote of the command to bring gifts for the sanctuary:

"Besides the immediate purpose of the campaign, to collect materials for the building of a sanctuary, it also serves an educational purpose: to convert the people from passive participants in their relationship with the Lord, as constant recipients of His gifts, into active partners.

...

As magnificent as some of our sanctuaries are, and as inspiring as our places of worship are, we still understand that it is not the **place** where we find God that is of primary importance. The physical space is but one tool, one means of reaching the sacred. We all know people who claim that they find God in nature rather than within the walls of any building. Our tradition recognizes this as well, especially in the alternate reading of a verse from Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel, a 19th Century commentator). He chose to read *v'shachanti b'tocham*, "I will dwell among them" as "I will dwell **within** them." He wrote: ". . . in **them**, the people, not in **it**, the sanctuary. We are each to build a Tabernacle in our own heart for God to dwell in."

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

There are two interpretations of the Hebrew word “*b’tocham*” here – indicating either that God will dwell “among” the Israelite people, or “within” them. How does the translation of this word affect how you understand the text? Which best reflects your understanding of what has gone on in this group over time?