

Creating Tabernacles of Justice

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This week's parashah is Trumah, which means 'gifts'. As was just read a few moments ago, this section of the Torah describes the creation of the tabernacle in the wilderness and the expectation that each person would bring free-will offerings to help build and beautify that holy space. We read in the parashah: *'The Lord spoke to Moses saying: Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him.'* The reading continues to list the many types of contributions that might be offered, from metalwork and gemstones, to finely embroidered fabrics and incense. Through the gifts of their hearts, the Israelites would create a grand structure that was magnificent enough to contain God's indwelling presence.

Interestingly, this is a parashah in which women are not mentioned at all. One might assume they are included within 'all the people,' but nowhere are the women's gifts recognized or acknowledged. That leaves me curious about just who it was spinning and dyeing the wool, weaving and embroidering the beautiful curtains that would adorn the ark. Of course, that would have been done by the women!

When free will offerings were no longer sufficient, the Israelites were required to provide actual service to keep the Tabernacle operational or, in lieu of service, they were permitted to make financial contributions matching the value of their labor. In the Book of Leviticus (27:1-7), we get specific guidance regarding the equivalent amount in shekels that they could contribute, providing a sliding scale of value by different individuals based on age and gender:

Males aged 20-60 = 50 shekels; females 20-60 = 30 shekels

Males 5-20 = 20 shekels; females 5-20 = 10 shekels

Boys 1-5 = 5 shekels; girls 1-5 = 3 shekels

Males over 60 = 15 shekels; females over 60 = 10 shekels

Some commentators note that we should not take this to mean that a woman herself was deemed to be worth only 3/5 of what a man is worth; rather it was a measure of the value of her actual labor that was deemed to be a fraction of that of

a man's. These commentators note in particular that childbearing appears to be a factor in diminishing the caliber of a woman's work, the evidence being that a woman gains work value as compared to a man once she is over 60 and past childbearing age, going from 1/2 the value to 2/3 the value. Who knew menopause came with such benefits!

So, according to this text, a woman's labor is worth on average 50 to 60% of a man's. Let me be somewhat heretical and argue that perhaps this is one Biblical pronouncement we might want to disregard.

This concept of assessments for Temple service continues in the Haftarah reading. Because this week is a special Sabbath, known as Shabbat Shekalim, we read a special haftarah this week. Coming from Second Kings, this section deals with how the Temple in Jerusalem was to be maintained through a tax in order to pay the laborers and craftsmen who kept the building in good repair. Not trusting the priests, the funds raised would be given to overseers who supervised the workers. It was specifically noted that there was no accounting of how the funds were used by the overseers because it was known that 'they dealt honestly' with the workers.

Our biblical texts dealt forthrightly with the issue of wages, outlining provisions about fairness and justice when dealing with employees. The texts also outline specifics when it came to measuring the value of labor.

So what do all these money matters mean for us today? What can we glean from our tradition about what to do - and what not to do - in establishing our own holy spaces today, so that they will be worthy structures for our sacred work?

Each one of us here contributes our free will offerings in many ways. When we do the work of sisterhoods, volunteer in the religious school, bake for the Oneg, and in so many other ways - those are all free will offerings. And most of us pay the tax, the shekels, in the form of membership dues, for the upkeep of our sacred facilities, hoping our sacred spaces will provide uplifting worship, inspirational programs, and meaningful educational opportunities.

Of course, we would like to believe that the overseers, in our case temple boards and management, deal honestly with the workers who keep our institutions clean and in good repair, who support the daily operations of our busy congregations, who educate and inspire our youth, and who guide the religious life of our communities. I'm sure that is the case in most of our congregations. That being said, dealing honestly, and dealing **fairly**, may be two different things.

Our texts on this Shabbat establish the expectation that we will support and maintain our sacred institutions, and that we will do so in a way that is worthy of God's presence. And we are taught that how we do this is equally important – we must deal honestly with those who do the work of maintaining our houses of worship if we are to create space worthy of God's presence.

Sadly, we have not made as much progress as we would like in the thousands of years since the valuation of men and women was established in our Biblical tradition. In the U.S., white women now earn on average 80% of their male counterparts; while African American and Latina women have made no progress since the Biblical era; they remain at the 50-60% mark as compared to white men.ⁱ In Canada, it's a bit better, however the laws, and the resulting statistics, vary from province to province. Even in Israel, which ranks among the highest in opportunities for women, women earn only 47% of their male counterparts. And the motherhood penalty continues to be a factor across the board.

The issue of pay equity is not a woman's issue – it is a family issue. When we under-value, and under pay, a segment of our workforce, everyone suffers. When a woman's income is diminished, that entire family's income is diminished.

It has been disappointing to learn that all the internal studies that have been done for our own Reform institutions show that our rabbis, cantors and educators face the same gender disparity as other professionals, which is about 85% of their male counterparts. This is the case as well for Jewish Federations, national and local Jewish organizations, and Jewish education institutions. This is simple unacceptable in our day and age.

In this regard, I have a confession to make... and I am somewhat embarrassed to admit it. Throughout my nearly 40-year career as a Jewish professional, I have never earned the same wages as my similarly situated male counterparts. Over the years, I have heard many excuses for this disparity. I have been told that I could not be paid the same because my male counterparts worked for the organization longer than I did, and it did not matter that I had more work experience and more advanced degrees. And I have been told that a newly hired younger colleague with less experience needed to be paid more than me because that's what it would cost to get 'good' people who are coming from higher paying jobs, and it did not matter that I was there longer and had more experience. And I have been told that my salary increases would be limited to cost of living increases, regardless of the value I brought to a position or increased responsibility, or that my initial salary on which those fractional increases were based was unfairly lower than similarly

situated men to begin with. I've heard it all, like most of my female colleagues working in the professional Jewish world.

I am embarrassed by this reality, because too often I failed to speak up for myself and too often I took 'no' for an answer. And I am embarrassed because the Jewish community I serve, and love, simply does not value me to the same degree as my male colleagues.

That is, however, until I came to WRJ. For the first time, when I raised the issue of salary, we engaged in a collaborative process of looking at standard salaries for comparable positions in the geographic area, factoring in cost of living, experience, qualifications, and responsibilities. And for the first time my salary was adjusted based on objective criteria. I am extremely grateful to WRJ for that – so thank you! That being said, I will never be able to reclaim the earnings and pension that I should have had for all those years, and my financial well-being will forever be diminished as a result.

We can do better than this. Women of Reform Judaism along with others in the Reform Movement have advocated for pay equity for many decades. We support judicial challenges and legislative solutions like the Paycheck Fairness Act to strengthen existing laws. We honored Lilly Ledbetter at our last assembly, for whom the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act was named. This is important work and we need to continue this advocacy.

But, my friends, there is more we could do, beginning with getting our own house in order. To that end, the Women's Rabbinical Network (WRN) and WRJ are working collaboratively to engage all of our Reform institutions, from our congregations, to our professional associations, to our national and global institutions, to grapple with this issue of fundamental fairness and justice. We are committed to moving the needle on this issue, and we need your help to do this.

Much to her credit, Rabbi Mary Zamore, Executive Director of WRN, orchestrated an historic meeting just a few months ago that brought together all of the lay and professional leaders of the Reform Movement institutions, including WRJ, for a day of learning and sharing on the issue of pay equity. Each organization shared their existing salary data and each committed to trying to do better. Everyone who was there, from Rabbi Rick Jacobs, to the leaders of the CCAR, the ACC (Cantor's association), HUC-JIR, and Reform professional associations for educators, administrators, and program, agreed to share responsibility for working on this issue. There is no institutional barrier to making this happen; it just takes the right nudge to make it happen.

This is a problem we can solve – at least within our own institutions. It is doable. It simply requires a commitment; a modern-day pledge to temple service that includes an equitable standard for evaluating the gifts that our paid staff provide through their labor. If our sacred tabernacles are to be worthy to embrace the Divine spirit, then all who labor for its wellbeing must be treated fairly and honestly.

There is one thing I hope all of you will take away from this – when you go back to your home communities, raise the question. You don't need to know anyone's salary, but ask your temple president, or your administrator, or your clergy, if the salaries you pay your dedicated staff members are fair and equitable. That includes everyone from janitors, to officer workers, to youth workers, to educators, to clergy. And don't take a simple 'yes' for an answer, find out how they assure that this is the case. Did they review comparable salary levels in the community? Did they go to any of the many websites that exist to provide standard salary information by geographic region? Did they consult the relevant professional associations to confirm that salary levels are appropriate and within the norms for your community? Do they periodically review salaries to determine if similarly situated staff, with comparable experience and training, are paid comparably? And are they committed to making adjustments when, and if, that is warranted?

If they can't answer these questions, you need to push harder. In the coming months, WRJ and WRN will be developing resources that you can share with your congregational leadership to help them engage in a process to do the assessments and make any adjustments that are needed for your synagogue to be the sacred community, built on a foundation of justice, that you want it to be. By the time those next surveys come out we may be at 90% or 95%, but if we keep at it, relentlessly, together we can move the needle on this issue all the way until women and men are finally at parity.

We owe this to ourselves, we owe this to our employees, and we owe this to our daughters and those who come after us.

Let us create our tabernacles today in a way that reflects our values. Let us treat those who labor in the service of our holy temples with fairness, and honesty. And let us bring our free will offerings to create sacred communities that will truly be worthy of God's presence.

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ⁱ Statistics: Institute for Women’s Policy Research: <https://iwpr.org/issue/employment-education-economic-change/pay-equity-discrimination/>;

AAUW: http://www.aauw.org/aauw_check/pdf_download/show_pdf.php?file=The-Simple-Truth