

TORAH SPARKS

SPIRIT TO GIVE

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

Dvar Parashah

At the beginning of the Exodus story, Moses came to us in Egypt with words of promise and liberation. But we literally could not **hear** him: וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה מִקְצֶר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה: "they did not listen to Moses from shortness of spirit and from the difficulty of their slavery." Our רוּחַ, our spirit, our breath, was compressed, shortened, choked from the work we had to do. From the lack of freedom.

Much happens between that verse and this parashah. The plagues. The sea. Sinai. The Golden Calf. The long terrible conversation in which God wants to destroy us and Moses refuses to let him. By the time we arrive here, at the actual building of the Mishkan, we are a people who have survived things we should not have survived, and done things we should not have done, and been forgiven in ways we did not deserve. God has freed us, saved us, nearly destroyed us, and taken us back. Most of all, we have become an us, a community, an עם, and עדה. A group of people who can listen, who can collectively **declare** נִעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע.

But it was as a community, a congregation without our leader, without Moses, that we demanded the Golden Calf. And so, when we build the Mishkan, God gives us the opportunity to turn our sin into blessing, to make the empty golden god with no interiority into a golden dwelling place for God, we will do it as individuals.

At **first**, Moses assembles the whole congregation, כָּל עֵדֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, and speaks to us of Shabbat and of building. He calls for נְדִיב לֵב, the generous of heart, and כָּל חֵכֶם לֵב, the skilled of heart. He is summoning individuals from within the collective, calling for what lives inside each person. **Then** the congregation goes out: כָּל עֵדֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, the same phrase, departs as it arrived. Intact. Together. Undifferentiated. We leave Moses's presence.

The text does not tell us what happens next. There is a gap, a private space outside Moses's presence, outside the frame of the narrative. And then people begin coming back. And **something** else comes back: כָּל אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר נָשְׂאוּ לֵב, "every person whose heart lifted them" and וְכָל אֲשֶׁר נָדְבָה רוּחוֹ, "everyone whose spirit moved freely." The grammar fragments into individuals. לֵב. רוּחוֹ. Each person's heart. Each person's spirit. One by one, each person located by what is moving inside them.

This is the grammar the sin of the Golden Calf lacked. When we built the golden calf, כָּל הָעָם, the whole nation, broke off our gold and brought it to Aaron. No heart is mentioned. No spirit moves. The crowd acts as a single body, without interiority, without the gap in which a person might have gone somewhere private and decided. Mass movement toward catastrophe. The calf was built by people who had forgotten they were individuals.

The Mishkan cannot be built that way. You cannot command a נְדָבָה, a freewill offering. The moment generosity becomes obligation it becomes something else entirely. So the congregation must go out and the individuals must come back, each one carrying what their own heart moved them to bring. The repair for the calf's collective thoughtlessness has to happen one רוּחַ at a time.

And then, once all those individuals have come back and given, the final verse reassembles them: הֵבִיאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נְדָבָה לַיהוָה, "the children of Israel brought a freewill offering to God." The family, בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, Jacob's children, named for the one who wrestled and was renamed and limped forward anyway. They went out as an assembly. They came back as a family, rebuilt from the inside, one heart at a time.

The thing that allows us to become individuals able to give is our רוּחַ. We read: וְכָל אֲשֶׁר נָדְבָה רוּחוֹ, "everyone whose spirit moved freely." These are the people who gave willingly, volunteered, moved by something that needed no compulsion. A spirit that has room to move. A spirit that can give.

In Egypt our רוּחַ was קָצֵר, short, cut off, compressed to nothing. Slavery does that. It takes the spirit and makes it small enough to fit inside survival. There is no room for generosity in a קָצֵר רוּחַ. There is barely room to breathe.

The distance between those two phrases, נְדָבָה רוּחוֹ and מִקְצֶר רוּחַ, is the distance the book of Exodus has traveled. The sea brought freedom with the drowning of our oppressors. But it is now that the spirit is learning that it has room again. Learning that it can move without being pushed. That it can give without being commanded. That there is something inside it beyond what suffering requires of it.

We are still in the wilderness. We will be in the wilderness for a long time. And we are, in some sense, always at war, a people who can never fully stop wrestling against the forces that would destroy us. The question is whether the רוּחַ is still alive inside it. Whether there is still something in us that can move freely, that can choose to come back through the door with our hands full, because our heart lifted us.