

Behar Behukotai Sermon 5778

For a long while I was a devotee of the PBS program ‘Antiques Roadshow,’ in which people in a particular city bring in household antiques and family heirlooms and have them explained and appraised. The criteria for value are varied: Some things are valuable because of the craftsmanship involved in their manufacture. Others have value because of their scarcity on the market; the laws of supply and demand apply no less to antiques than to any other commodity. Still others have little monetary value, but do have personal value to their owners, who would probably not sell them in any case. ‘Antiques Roadshow’ shows us that there is nothing like inherent worth. An object’s value is always dependent upon what people are willing to pay for it, upon the condition of the object and upon that object’s place in our shared material culture.

In the Torah portion this week, at the end of parshat Behukotai, God gives Moses the rules for the valuation of human beings. At first glance, this seems absurd: Why would God want to attach a value to people? Adding to this uncomfortable notion, we also notice that the amount varies from person to person, based on age and gender. Women and the elderly were assessed lower values than men and the young. All of this leaves a sour taste when read without comment; there seems to be no connection between the law here and what Jews actually do and believe.

But the context of the verses, at the end of the book of Leviticus and in a section that describes the funding of the mishkan, the portable sanctuary that the Israelites used to communicate with God, makes clear that this is actually an important lesson about our relationship to religious institutions and to God. In the JPS edition of the Torah, Professor Barukh Levine explains, first of all, that the operations and maintenance of the Temple and its

priests was an expensive proposition. God's house, in the form that it eventually took in Jerusalem, was an imposing building, constructed to be impressive to see and to experience. It had a large staff of priests and their assistants to offer the sacrifices, to maintain the building and to administer the numerous activities that took place there on a daily basis. Second, Professor Levine teaches us that it was actually common for people to make voluntary offerings to the Temple equal to *their own* value. The question that the Torah is answering is what that amount is.

In trying to construct an answer to the question 'What is the value of a human being?' we are familiar with the criteria that courts and insurance companies use when determining how much to compensate someone who is injured or the family of someone who has been killed: What is the person's current income and future earning power? What are their responsibilities to their families? How old are they? Those questions show that one way to place a value on a human being is to calculate their role within the family. As distasteful as it is, we understand that there are circumstances in our own time when we are forced to assign monetary values to human lives.

That same process is at work in the Torah, when individuals voluntarily give their own money to support the functions of the mishkan. The desire to support the central religious institution of the time is one we understand; we all support the synagogue in the same way. So we can understand that there are circumstances in which people are assigned a dollar value, and we also understand that Jews have always supported their religious institutions. The only remaining question that continues to nag us is that of the differing values between men and

women and between the young and elderly. Does the Torah really assign less relative value to women, children and the elderly than to young men?

The key to understanding the difference in values here is that these are *voluntary* contributions. The Torah limits the amount that people, including women, were required donate to the *mishkan*, relative to its own sense of their roles within the family. In addition, it has been pointed out that the differences in amounts probably reflect the difference in the value of labor that each person was capable of, meaning more for able-bodied men and less for the elderly, children and, yes, women.

The emphasis here is not on the amounts, but rather on the act of voluntary giving for the upkeep of the *mishkan*. Because the Tabernacle was at the center of religious life, supporting it was simply assumed by the people. The question, as always, is how much each person feels moved to give. Those who saw themselves as the central financial support were expected to give more than someone who was, by nature of their gender or age, dependent on them. As in modern cases of assigning value to people, everything is contingent on notions of what is truly of value.

This is grandparents Shabbat, and we welcome all those who have come with their children's children, even if only for a short while. We know how hard it is for some grandparents to sit still and not fidget during a long service. If we were to ask how to assign valuations to grandchildren in our day, my observation is that grandparents put an infinitely high value on them, not because of their earning ability or usefulness in labor, but for the reward they feel in seeing the future they have made possible take shape.

This is also the third of three Shabbatot we are devoting to understanding the history of egalitarian practice in the Conservative movement and our own plans for next year. During

kiddush in the Kroll Ballroom I will recap some of what we have already discussed and make several specific proposals for the coming year. As we come to the end of a year of discussion on these issues, it occurs to me that the core idea that we are discussing is how we assign value, and thus responsibility, to the members of our community. Those who volunteer to contribute their time, resources and efforts to the synagogue, the modern parallel to the ancient *mishkan*, want to feel that they are being properly valued. Moving into our shared future, my hope is that every member of EBJC feels that our religious services reflect the moral value of every individual's ultimate value.

Shabbat shalom.