

Give 'Til It Hurts

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Parshat Vayak'hel

It happened one night that Count Dracula (and I speak not of the historical Dracula, the Romanian ruler Count Vlad Dracul, "Vlad the Impaler," who well deserved his title and inspired Bram Stoker's story of the fictional Count Dracula, but rather of the stereotyped version of the count) came into a young woman's bedroom and awakened her, announcing, "I am Count Dracula. I have come to drink your blood."

The woman, begging for mercy, replied, "Please, Count, have mercy on me. You've been feeding all night, and you don't need to drink any more blood. Besides, I'm a young woman, about to enter the prime of my life. You don't really need to take me, too. Please, have a heart."

"Okay," the count answered her; "don't mind if I do."

In this week's Torah portion, we read that the people gave to the construction of the Tabernacle, each one giving as prompted by his or her heart. The people gave of their hearts, and they gave so much that Moses (Exodus 36:6) was forced to ask them to stop giving!

When, centuries later, King Solomon directed the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, he was forced to impose a tax to raise the necessary funds for the construction. What a contrast! Indeed, a double contrast!

First, if our hearts do not move us to give, as they did in response to Moses' call, then we may find ourselves in the position of the woman who faced the bloody count, and we may find that the heart that declined to give is taken. Bette Midler sings in *The Rose*, "It's the heart that won't be taken that never learns to give." It may well be the other way 'round, however; the heart that never learns to give is the one that gets taken.

One can have a heart or one can give of one's heart. Count Dracula was interested in stealing the heart, but Moses was able to inspire the people voluntarily to give of their hearts, until he finally had to tell them to stop.

And then we have the second contrast, between Moses and Solomon. Both were great leaders, but Moses had to call an end to the overflow of giving, while Solomon had to impose a tax to make the people give. What is the root of the difference?

Moses and Solomon both led the people. Each was at the head of the governmental structure, the political “head of state” and “head of government.” And each was devoted to following G*d’s Commands. But each had his own emphasis, his own primary concern.

Moses, for all his political power and awareness, was driven primarily (one may even say totally) by his relationship with G*d. Moses, the Torah tells us, was the most humble individual in the world. He exercised power, to be sure, but he was continually aware that he did so only as G*d’s agent, and, when G*d gave him instructions that conflicted with his own inclinations, he set aside his will before G*d’s Will. Furthermore, Moses, in exercising his political power, always did so in explicit consultation with G*d.

Solomon was indeed a pious, G*d-revering man. We read of Solomon’s deep faith in the three Biblical Books traditionally attributed to him – the Song of Songs, reflecting the passion of his youth; Proverbs, reflecting the wisdom of his adulthood; and Ecclesiastes, reflecting, sadly, a far more cynical and bitter Solomon in his old age. (How interesting it is that Moses’ old age, as reflected in the Book of Deuteronomy, does not encompass the cynicism and bitterness of Ecclesiastes!) But Solomon, for all his piety, was primarily a political leader, enamored of the trappings of power and wealth. When he ruled, he did so without consultation. He did not “check in with” G*d at every juncture, as Moses did. He was king, and, for all his piety, he gladly ruled as a king.

Further, Moses, time and again, argued with G*d, either protesting his own inability to do what G*d demanded of him (returning to Mitzrayim to lead the Children of Israel to freedom) or protesting that G*d was not G*d’ing properly (as, after the worship of the Golden Calf, G*d was prepared to annihilate the Israelites). Solomon never had the intimate relationship that would have permitted him to argue faithfully and lovingly with G*d.

Because Moses, as a spiritual being, had no attachment to wealth (save as the wealth could be used for the greater glory of G*d), the people, when Moses inspired them, also felt little if any attachment to their wealth, and they gave. Not “until it hurt,” for they felt no hurt in their giving, but until Moses had to ask them to stop.

Solomon, on the other hand, enamored as he was of the trappings of power and wealth, inspired the people to love their wealth as much as he loved his, and he therefore could not just let them know that the money was needed; he had to impose a tax upon them.

Shabbat Shalom.