

Parshat Terumah
February 28, 2009
by Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

We are living in unprecedented times. The American economy and the world economy continue to sink further and further into – well what should we call it? To describe what we are going through more and more people reach for references from the Great Depression of 1929.

I don't know about you but I find little comfort in pundits telling me that today's crisis is "different from the Great Depression in many ways..." In many ways it may indeed be different – but does that mean in some ways it is similar? I do not find such reassurances reassuring. And our President has become Cheerleader-in-Chief as he goes on TV to deliver a major address to the joint houses of Congress to tell us that "Yes things are serious, very serious but not without hope..." Did I feel better after his speech? Well, yes...and no.

President Obama used the word "crisis" 11 times in his address, more than twice as much as any other president. President Hoover used it only four times in his speech in 1932 during the Great Depression. President Obama was the first president in history to use the word "bailout" in a State of the Union address. Oh, I know, technically it was not a State of the Union address, but that is just a technicality. The president is trying to convince us that bailouts and stimulus packages are necessary to jump start a weak economy. Will it work? Well time will tell. While politicians debate the wisdom of this course of action the rest of us hope and pray he is correct and that this stimulus package will begin the process of restoring our markets and our economy back to life.

But as a rabbi, I have begun to wonder if bailouts and stimulus packages are the cure for what ails us as Jews.

This economic crisis has had serious implications for Jewish institutions as well as the general economy. The Madoff scandal and the weakening market, job layoffs and the economic downturn has sent shock waves throughout the Jewish community. CAJE – the Conference on Alternatives in Jewish Education – ceased to exist overnight. The American Jewish Committee is on life support, Brandeis University, Yeshiva University even our beloved Jewish Theological Seminary is undertaking drastic measures to respond to the economic challenges. Even here at Temple Beth Sholom we are in the process of adopting an austerity budget for next year that is going to have far-reaching and dramatic consequences for what we do and how we do it.

And this economic crisis comes on top of the pre-existing crisis in the Jewish community that we had already been dealing with. Even before the economic downturn we had been wrestling with increased assimilation, more Jews who say I am not religious and don't want to affiliate with the Jewish community or join synagogues, the aging of the Jewish community combined with the lowering Jewish birth rates. Yes, the current economic crisis came on top of all of these challenges with which we were already wrestling. And as I was listening to our president describe the kinds of programs he felt were necessary to meet the challenges facing America, I began to

wonder if these kinds of things might work to meet the challenges that were facing us as a Jewish community? The president has laid out a plan of bailouts and stimulus's to save the American economy. Can bailouts and stimulus's do it for the Jewish community? The answer is yes...and no; or more precisely – no...and yes.

First: the no.

I don't think there will be any bailout for the financial challenges confronting our beloved Jewish institutions. The US Government set up a \$700 billion bank bailout program. And in his speech on Tuesday evening, the president made it clear that more money will probably be needed. New York-based Citigroup already has received \$45 billion in bailout money, plus guarantees to cover losses on hundreds of billions of dollars in risky investments. But who will write such bailouts for Jewish institutions? While it certainly doesn't seem fair that we at Temple Beth Shalom are going to have to sort things out for ourselves while Citi-Bank gets a fat check from the government for \$45 billion – *dems da facts*, as they say and the sooner we accept that the sooner we can make the tough decisions that are going to have to be made to get ourselves back onto solid ground. No, unfortunately bailouts will not be the salvation of the Jewish community, but stimulus packages? Now here is an idea I think might just have some merit.

Bailout's and stimulus packages are very different kinds of salvation schemes. A bailout is top down but a stimulus is bottom up. Bailouts are *deus ex machina* -- the hand of God coming down from heaven to resolve dilemmas down here on earth – surprising and unnatural interventions that solve things for us – while stimulus is a method of problem solving that maintains the emphasis on us, it gives us a jolt, a nudge, but the hard work of solving the problem remains in our hands. We Jews are not unfamiliar with bailouts – see Exodus ch 12 – *Parshat Bo* which we read a few of weeks ago and that details the exodus from Egypt, the humbling of Pharaoh and the liberation of the Jewish people through the miraculous intervention of God. Or keep reading a little further in *Parshat Beshalach* of the events at the shore of the Red Sea when the Egyptian chariots were closing fast and God caused the sea to split and the children of Israel to pass through in safety. Yes, we as Jews know from bailouts, in fact they rank, I dare say, as some of the greatest bailouts in history! So why am I so quick to dismiss bailouts as a source of salvation for our contemporary dilemmas? Well, unfortunately for us, it seems that God has gone out of the bailout business. Already by the days of the rabbis, some 2000 years ago, the leaders of our community were counseling us not to depend on bailouts: *ayn somchin al haneis*, “one may not depend on miracles” the rabbis teach in Shabbat 32a. And Purim – which is coming up in 11 days is the first great holiday which embodies this “new way” of Jews doing business. God's name does not appear once in the entire Scroll of Esther – rather God's salvation works in a new way – not above and beyond history – but through history itself. Salvation in Shushan came not by the supernatural intervention of God splitting the sea but by the wiles of Esther and her uncle Mordechai. Jewish faith, Jewish ingenuity and Jewish commitment become the new model of Jewish salvation. As Mordechai sat outside the palace gates, in sackcloth and ashes, contemplating the imminent destruction of his people and everything he loved it dawned on him that absent a divine bailout which was becoming increasingly unlikely, what was needed now was a stimulus package of urgent proportions. It is no coincidence that the climactic moment of the Purim story as the entire fate of the Jewish people hangs in the balance and Esther must decide what she will do – put her life on the line or not, has Mordechai saying to her: *u'mi yodea im layt*

kazot higaat l'malchut? "Who knows if it is only because of this moment that you attained royalty..." Thankfully, Esther embraces the stimulus plan (the king being the one in need of stimulus) and the rest, as they say, is history. I believe that Judaism's current preference for stimulus packages over bailouts can further be demonstrated in today's *parasha*, *Terumah*.

The Book of Genesis devotes 34 verses to the creation of the world, but the Book of Exodus dedicates almost 400 verses to the details of the building of the Tabernacle, not to mention additional detailed descriptions of the Priestly garments and duties...all of which is elaborated later in the Book of Leviticus. Over ten times as much space is devoted to the construction of a simple tent structure - 20 planks long and 8 planks wide; not even covered by a roof, but by curtains; ten times as much space is dedicated in the Bible to this *Mishkan* than to the Creation of the entire universe and all that it contains! There has to be some explanation to this disparity. There has to be some logic to a Bible that breezes through the creation of the entire universe in 34 verses but pauses for 400 verses on the building of a tent! I believe that there is an explanation and I believe it has to do with our Jewish preference for stimulus over bailouts.

The Torah does not teach us very much about the construction of the world, only 34 verses. But, it does focus on our responsibilities to build structures in the world in which we find ourselves. God created the world; but we have duties within that world which God created. The *mishkan*, the small sanctuary was not God given, but would be the result of our own effort and creativity.

34 verses were dedicated to the creation of the world - because it is important for us to know who created the world in which we live and why it was created. But, having established those facts the Bible is clearly more interested in *our* job rather than God's.

There is not much one can do in the face of bailouts but be thankful for them. God created the universe: Wow! Thank you. That is about all you can say in the face of a bailout. (And if I were giving advice to the execs over at CitiBank that would be precisely what I would tell them to do in the face of their bailout – not throw lavish parties like the execs over at Northern Trust – just say, "Wow! Thank you!")

But 400 verses dedicated to the building of the Tabernacle teaches us that when bailouts are no longer forthcoming – there is work to be done – a lot of work to be done and we are going to have to roll up our sleeves and do it!

400 verses on the building of the *mishkan* teach us that there are structures to be built in our world as well. The world, created by God, was not handed to us as a *fait accompli* but as a work in progress. It is our challenge to finish the work that God began and the Bible is intended to be *our* blueprint not God's - hence the emphasis on the structures we must build as opposed to the universe that God created.

God gave us the gift of life, the gift of the universe: Wow! Thank you. And then in today's torah reading God tells us what comes next, after we express our amazement after we express our appreciation, it is as if God says: "Your welcome and then God turns to Moses and in the opening words of today's reading says: *daber el b'nai yisrael v'yikhu li teruma mayeyt kol ish asher*

yidvenu libo , Now, “Speak to my people and tell them to bring me gifts, gifts from each and every one of them as their heart moves them... Build, create, institute, initiate, do what needs to be done – you have all the gifts you need to save your world. You don’t need Me to bail you out.

And so I end today with a question – one I will be returning to time and time again over the next weeks and months: What are the gifts you possess at this time of crisis that can be used in the service of the salvation of our people? What do you have to offer? *Mi yodea im layt kazot higaat l’malchut?* Who knows, maybe it was for this moment you attained your position, your passion, your talent, your commitment – your presence. As Mordechai said to Esther – there will be no bailout for the Jewish people – not this time – if we are going to survive it is going to be because of you – can we count on you?