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*Bronfman Torah: commentary on the Torah that draws on the lives, skills, and insights of our community*

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# The Wise-Hearted Mouse

Aaron Steinberg | Bronfman Torah | Vayakehel-Pekuday 2017

*Aaron Steinberg is the Deputy Director: North America for The Bronfman Fellowship, and he loves nothing more about his job than chatting with an alum over a hot drink. Outside of the office he is involved with "wise-hearted" activists in his hometown of White Plains. At night, he and his spouse Adina take turns reading bedtime stories to Dahlia (6), Judah (3) and Noah (1). Some of his favorites include [Wait Till the Moon is Full](#), [Yertle the Turtle](#), and [Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed](#).*

*And since winter was not far off, the little mice began to gather corn and nuts and wheat and straw. They all worked day and night. All -- except Frederick.*

I smiled this past week when my son Judah asked me to read "[Frederick](#)" by [Leo Lionni](#) before bedtime. The book lacks the excitement of some other stories, and might even be considered boring by some. It's the story of a mouse who neglects his responsibility to collect food for the winter, and instead spends his time gathering sunshine, colors and words to help his mice friends get through the bleak, dark days. As the cold comes and their food supply runs low, the other mice turn to Frederick to warm them with the glow of the sun; describe the beautiful colors of spring, summer and fall; and recite poetry. His contribution is intangible and indispensable at the same time.

The biblical Israelites, in the period following revelation at Mount Sinai, find themselves in need of a Frederick. They wander in the desert without a clear

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direction. They are under attack from other tribes, and rely on a supernatural food source that they fear could disappear at any time. Although arguably their physical needs are taken care of by the Manna and a tag team of a protective cloud and fire provided by god, they are still missing something. They need inspiration. They need a source of hope.

*"Frederick, why don't you work?" they asked.  
"I do work," said Frederick.  
"I gather sun rays for the cold dark winter days."*

Unlike the divine food and protection, hope needs to come from the people themselves. As Moses announces the commencement of a national project to build the Tabernacle and its accompanying accessories, he presents it as a project for the "entire assembly of Israel." The supplies don't materialize magically like the [banquet of quail from chapter 16](#) - the people are responsible for contributing everything including precious metals, stones, fabrics, wood, dyes and more.

Even more significantly, the exact design of most of the Tabernacle is not transmitted in blueprint form through divine prophecy for the Israelites to follow mindlessly. Moses describes people who are "wise-hearted" - whom god inspires with a holy spirit that imparts knowledge, wisdom and ability. God provides the tools, but the tabernacle will need to be a human creation.

What does the Holy Ark do? Nothing really (except melt Nazis in "Raiders"). It's an emblem of the covenant between god and the Israelites. It's a source of light, warmth and color when the desert nights are cold and dark. It's a manifestation of god's presence in the center of the camp - and women and men build it.

Of course this isn't the first time the people have played a role in creating their own talisman. The golden calf was a human creation made with supplies donated by the people. One very notable difference between the Ark and the calf is the role of craftspeople. Aaron is described as simply casting the gold in a mold and creating the idol. Among other problems with the golden calf, the lack of "wise-hearted" people is glaring.

We all have the power and responsibility to shape the environment we inhabit.

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Hope for a better future can be found among any passionate people committed to improving the world. Of course within our own Bronfman community, individuals and groups are engaged in this kind of work - some of whom [received AVF grants](#) last month. But this is not just a message for the innovators, and it's not just a message for Bronfmanim. Whether you're a Frederick or a forager, donor or master craftsman, the only place people need to look in dark times is towards one another.

*And when he told them of the blue periwinkles, the red poppies in the yellow wheat, and the green leaves of the berry bush, they saw the colors as clearly as if they had been painted in their minds.*

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*P.S.: We're always looking for more dvar torah writers. Interested? Contact [stefanie@byfi.org](mailto:stefanie@byfi.org). We look forward to hearing from you.*



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