

Parashat Trumah To Give or not to Give?

Struggling with Opening the Door to Give

Knock, knock, knock – Its 9:30 pm, I'm alone in my nightgown and robe, my husband is working on night duty. Who could it be? I know it, at this hour it's gotta be some 'blackhatted' beggars from Beitar or Jerusalem. Although there is a general obligation to give everyone who asks for money-based upon the verse in the Torah that states, "Do not harden your heart nor close your hand" (*Devarim* 15:7)- I don't feel like opening my door, especially, lately, when terrible tragedies have happened to women in their doorway. I yell out from the glass window of the door, that my husband is not home and they can't come in. I catch myself feeling a bit of resentment and judgmental thoughts. "How did these beggars get all the way to Bat Ayin? If they have their own car, they can't be so poor and needy. If they came by bus; couldn't the time they spent on transportation be better spent in productive work?" Many of those chareidi men who knock on the doors of Gush Etzion have fine letters from rabbis and touching stories about all kinds of good causes including: the yeshiva, brides and grooms and the mortally ill who need operations overseas. Yet, we all know that they are really collecting for themselves. I respect when, once in a while, a collector says so outright. Appreciating this sincerity makes it so much easier to donate.

Rambam teaches us "to be careful with regard to the mitzvah of *tzedakka* (charity) to a greater extent than all [other] positive mitzvot, because *tzedakka* is an identifying mark for a righteous person, a descendant of Avraham, our patriarch. As it states, 'I have known him, because he commands his children... to perform charity'" (*Bereishit* 18:19); (Rambam, *Misnah Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor* 10:1). I certainly don't want to close my heart and be cruel causing my Jewish lineage to be suspected, as Rambam also writes, "Whenever a person is cruel and does not show mercy, his lineage is suspect, for cruelty is found only among the gentiles" (Ibid. 2). So what do I do about opening the door to the 'knocking men' after dark, when I'm home alone? I'm glad I once posed this question to my students. One of them suggested that I always keep outside my door a little closed jar with a five shekel coin. Whenever beggars come at night, I just tell them about the coin without having to let anyone in my home. Brilliant idea!

You Get What You Give

When we give, we receive and draw Divine Influence upon ourselves. We can learn this from the opening verse of our Weekly Torah Portion:

ספר שמות פרק כה (ב)

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִקְחוּ לִי תְרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְבְּנוּ לִבּוֹ תִקְחוּ אֶת תְּרוּמָתִי:

"Speak to the Children of Israel and take Me a donation from every person whose heart moves him, take donations for Me" (*Shemot* 25:2).

Rather than writing, "take a donation for me," the Torah verse literally says, "...take Me as a donation." When we give with our full heart, then we receive Divine gifts, as Rambam writes,

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

“A person will never become impoverished from giving charity. No harm nor damage will ever be caused because of charity, as it states, ‘The deed of charity is peace’ (*Yesha’yahu*. 32:17). Everyone who is merciful evokes mercy from others, as it states, ‘He shall grant you mercy and shower mercy upon you and multiply you’” (*Devarim* 13:18); (Rambam, *ibid.*). Our Torah verse also does not use the word *וַיִּתְּנוּ/v’yitnu* – they shall give, but rather *וַיִּקְחוּ/v’ikchu* – they shall take. From this, we may learn, “What you give always comes back to you!” “The more you give, the more you get!” Even the words, *וַיִּתְּנוּ/v’yitnu* – they shall give, and *נָתַן/natan* – he gave testify to this principle as they are Palindromes – words that read the same backward and forward. I have a favorite story that illustrates this point. There is a little old lady on her way to the World-to-Come with a bag of cookies, that she is saving for herself to enjoy over there. Many people ask her for a cookie but she insists that she needs to save them, until one little hungry girl with big begging eyes tugs at her heartstrings. The heart of the little old lady is filled with compassion and she offers the hungry girl two of her precious cookies. Later, in the World-to-Come, the little old lady is looking for her cookie bag that she had so carefully saved, but cannot find it. Finally, she finds the two cookies that she gave to the little hungry girl. These were the only ones that made it to the World-to-Come. Although we can’t take any of our earthly possessions with us to the grave, what we give remains with us for eternity.

Dealing with Phone Solicitation Interruptions

The word *tzedakka* demonstrates how fundamental giving is in the Torah. Charity is actually not the correct translation, as *tzedakka* literally means justice. Hashem makes us the custodians of a little extra, which was never ours to begin with. Therefore, giving *tzedakka* is an act of justice whereby we return the money to its rightful owner. As I’m writing this, the abrupt buzzing of the telephone interrupts me. As soon as I hear the voice on the other line, “Hello is this Mrs. Segal Baum?” I know it’s a fundraising phone call. I am usually interrupted by several of those calls each week and sometimes even daily. We are solicited for all kinds of good causes, from requests to help cancer patients, learning-disabled children, youth at risk, yeshivot and more. I don’t know why but they always manage to find the most inconvenient times to call- when I’m in the middle of a writing spurt or preparing a class. I can easily answer, “Sorry you have got the wrong number. There is no one here called Segal.” Or, if they ask for my parents (I guess I have a youthful voice), I often say that my parents are not here- which is true!

The Torah requires us to give between 10-20% of our income to *tzedakka* (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 249) based on (*Bereishit* 14:20, 28:22); (*Devarim* 14:22). Since we give most of our *tzedakka* to Midreshet B’erot Bat Ayin, poor people in Bat Ayin, our son’s yeshiva, poor brides and grooms, and a few other institutions that we are familiar with, we don’t have a *tzedakka* budget for random phone-calls. Thus, I find myself having to turn away so many callers for excellent causes. It makes me feel guilty to close my pocketbook and heart to all these solicitations. Especially, when I remember how it feels to be on the other side, when I go on my annual fundraising tour, asking for donations for Holistic Torah for Women on the Land. On my very first tour, in the year 2000, when I knocked on a door with a mezuzah in an affluent neighborhood of New York, the man literally slammed the door in my face before I could complete my first sentence. That was the end of cold-calls and knocking on unfamiliar doors. So, no matter how inconvenient a disruption, I try to be as nice as possible to every caller, even if I’m unable to donate.

Entering the Giving and Receiving Cycle

I prefer giving rather than being on the receiving end. However, according to the Torah outlook the giver is also a receiver and the receiver, a giver in an infinite giving cycle. The more we give the more we receive. This is similar to a mother nursing her baby – the more the baby nurses the more milk is produced in her breasts. Just as when lighting one candle from another, the original candle is not diminished by being shared- on the contrary, the two candles together enhance each other's brightness and increase light. This explains why, "A person will never become impoverished from giving charity" (Rambam *ibid.*). The Torah states, "Aser te'aser, tithe you shall tithe" (*Devarim* 14:22). The word אָסַר/*aser* –tithe shares the same root as the word אָשִׁיר/*ashir* – rich. Thus, the Talmud explains this verse to mean, "Tithe and you will become rich, *aser beshvil shetitaser*" (*Babylonian Talmud Shabbat* 119a). The more we give, the more our soul will be nourished, our life will be enriched and the more we will feel like our life has a purpose. As I depart on my annual North America tour and become the recipient of the kindness and *tzedakka* of so many friends and supporters, I remember that I'm just a channel and courier for Hashem to help distribute the generous gifts from across the Atlantic and bring them home to His Holy Land.

Bringing Redemption by Elevating Everything through Giving

My dear friend Chava Berg shared with me that as an additional *tzedakka*, she gives a shekel a day in the following way: Each morning before her daily prayer, she puts ten, 10-agurot pieces in her *pushke* (charity box). She exchanges her new shekel donation with the ten original 10-agurot pieces in her *puskhe*. For each coin, she makes a prayer-request, often for her children and other important matters. This way of *tzedakka* really helped me connect with the mitzvah of giving and now I always have coins handy to give when beggars knock or when I go to Jerusalem. The *Ba'al HaTanya* emphasizes that giving *tzedakka* more than any other mitzvah brings about the *geulah* (redemption). By giving a donation, an act of pure *chesed* (kindness), we elevate both body and soul completely toward the Divine. Whereas other mitzvot we perform with either our hands, mouth or heart, our entire being goes into the mitzvah of *tzedakka*. The work required to earn the money for our contribution employs all of ourselves (*Tanya*, Chapter 37). This explains why money is called דָּמִים/*damim* – blood in the Torah. We may be unable to make Aliyah to Israel, yet, we can raise all of ourselves to the Holy Land through the donations of our 'blood.' Another word for charity is the title of this week's *parasha* תְּרוּמָה/*Teruma*, which literally means raising up or elevating. *Tzedakka* brings about the *geulah*, by gradually elevating everything until we reach the highest place (*Igeret HaKodesh*, Chapter 21). The throne of Israel will not be established, nor will the true faith stand except through *tzedakka* as it states, "You shall be established through righteousness" (*Yesha'yahu* 54:14). Israel will be redeemed solely through charity, as it states, "Tzion will be redeemed through judgment and those who return to her through charity" (*Ibid.* 1:27); (Rambam, *Laws of Gifts to the Poor* 10:1).