

Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Vayakhel

How Do we Tackle the Paradox of When to Give and When Not to Give?

Filling Our Bellies with the Spirit of Love and Overflowing Kindness

Last week, I filled my car with students, and we drove to Kever Rachel (The Tomb of Rachel) to pray for our people. On our way out, we stopped at a table laden with food and goodies. There was a complete meal of various kinds of homemade pizzas, bourekas, and even veggie sticks. The students were wondering about the occasion. I answered, "Perhaps people are sharing food as a tzedakka and hospitality at Rachel's Tomb to bring merit to our people." It turned out that the spread was in honor of a new bride who wasn't present but inside the tomb praying. Although I don't usually allow myself to eat pizza (white flour and yellow cow cheese), the spirit of the love that could be felt in the food, and the happiness with which the givers offered it, made up for any physical lack. So, I allowed myself to enjoy together with my students. It was such a sweet feeling, as those who offered the food kept filling our plates with such magnanimity, that their food nurtured our hearts and souls more than the heartiest health food meal. One of the students shared what she learned about prayer. When you feel really good after praying, that means your prayers are being heard. Otherwise, you need to keep praying until you reach a spiritual high. I half-jokingly responded, "After that meal how could you not feel great!" Yet, what I really meant is that partaking wholeheartedly of the overflowing kindness of this mitzvah meal helped bring our prayers down to earth so they could be fulfilled! Let's keep our prayers flowing and expect them to be answered. Let us also keep our enthusiastic giving going, sharing of ourselves with a full heart!

Overcoming Obstacles in the Way of Reaching Our Goal of Giving

These last five months since the Simchat Torah war have been challenging but also overflowing with goodness. Everyone has been extending their hearts in giving even beyond their means and sometimes even more than what is needed. This reflects the overflowing giving of the Israelites during the desert wandering toward the construction of the Mishkan, the holy abode for the Shechinah - Divine indwelling feminine presence.

ספר שמות פרק לה פסוק כא וַיָּבֵאוּ כָּל אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר נָשָׂאוּ לְבֹו וְכָל אֲשֶׁר נָדְבָה רוּחוֹ אֶתוֹ הֵבִיאוּ אֶת תְּרוּמַת הַשֵּׁם לְמִלְאכַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְלִכְל עֲבֹדָתוֹ וּלְבִגְדֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ:

"Every person whose heart uplifted him came, and everyone whose spirit inspired him to generosity brought the offering of Hashem for the work of the Tent of Meeting, for all its service, and the holy garments" (*Shemot* 35:21).

Our life experience teaches us that there exists a great distance between intention and deed, between goodwill and actualizing it. We often have great intentions but at times we do not manage to carry them into completion. Therefore, the Torah tells us that regarding the donations for the Mishkan, the reality was completely different. Every Jew carried out his good intentions to truly give and each person managed to actually bring his offering. This way the donors joined the great deed of erecting the Tabernacle to make G-d's presence rest among His people (Rabbi Chayim Yosef David Azulai (the Chida) 1724 -1806, Jerusalem Israel). Many obstacles prevent us from carrying out our good intentions. The primary one is procrastination, putting our goals off until 'someday.' Since 'someday' never appears on the calendar, we may never accomplish our goals if we keep pushing them off.

The best of intentions won't do us any good without a clear plan. Another related obstacle may be waiting to take action until 'feeling' ready, which can keep us waiting a long time. Sometimes we give up before seeing results. Impatience is the enemy of change. And in today's digital world, most people struggle to wait for the time it takes to reach the goal of giving. We may also harbor fears that we are unworthy of the greatness of giving. Just as there is fear of failure, at times fear of success can be a real problem too. Perhaps we are afraid that we won't be successful in truly giving with our full heart, or that someone else will precede and leave us behind. We also may set ourselves up for failure by setting our goals too high and deciding to give way beyond our capabilities. It is important to go slow and not take on too much too fast. So instead of making several hundred cookies for the soldiers, let's start with a manageable batch working together with a friend toward reaching our goal of giving.

Two Ways of Giving - With an Uplifted Heart or an Inspired Spirit

Although we must know our limitations in giving, our Torah verse praises the person whose heart lifts him up to give beyond his means as it states **נָשָׂאוֹ לְבוֹ** /*naso libo* - "His heart lifts him up. This is the first and highest level of giving when our hearts are so inspired to give that we rise above all the obstacles and give beyond our natural limitations. The word **אִישׁ** /*ish* is mentioned in conjunction with this first level - describing a person who volunteers more than his ability from the greatness of the goodness of his heart - because this word denotes importance. This is to Israel's praise that they had their heart with them in their giving. Their hearts were open to inspire them to extraordinary giving. The next level is the one who volunteers out of the will of his soul according to his ability and financial status. This person is described as **נִדְבָה רוּחוֹ** /*nidvah rucho* - "of volunteer spirit." Both of these levels are high (Ohr HaChayim, *Shemot* 35:21). We need to learn to become self-aware enough to know what kind of giving is appropriate for us at any given time. Therefore, we mustn't be self-critical and wallow in guilt if we are 'only' on the second level of more calculated giving. If we aren't yet on the uplifted level to give beyond our ability, then exercising boundaries may be the very best thing we can do not only for ourselves but also for our would-be- recipients. There is a needy woman who isn't a friend, but someone often calls me to come for Shabbat, stay in our home, and eat with us. Sometimes I go beyond myself to host her, but when I say no, it's hard for me not to feel guilty. I look forward to Shabbat taking some time to spend just with my husband and I treasure having time to take walks with him and to study together just the two of us! In addition, whenever our married sons and granddaughters want to come for Shabbat our home is open to them. After taking advice about the issue, it turns out that the woman who wants to be our Shabbat guest has a beautiful home of her own and many adult children with whom to spend Shabbat. So, do you agree that according to the second level of giving, I must set boundaries without feeling guilty?

The Spiritual Lack of Calculated Giving

סַפְרֵי שְׂמוֹת פְּרָקָה לֵה פְּסוּקָה כֹּז וְהַנְּשָׂאִים הִבְיָאוּ אֶת אַבְנֵי הַשֹּׁהַם וְאֶת אַבְנֵי הַמְּלֵאִים לְאִפּוֹד וְלַחֹשֶׁן:
 "Then the princes brought the *shoham* (onyx) stones and filling stones for the ephod and for the *choshen*" (*Shemot* 35:27).

When I searched for this Torah verse in my computer program, I couldn't find it because I spelled the word **נְשִׂאִים** /*nesi'im* - "princes" the normal way with a *yud*. Yet in our pasuk, the word **נְשָׂאִים** /*nesi'im* is missing the *yud*. So, I was pondering why and found the Prisha commentary

explaining that the missing *yud* alludes to a small spiritual mistake that the princes committed. The verse describing the princes' donation is mentioned last, after relating the eagerness with which all of Israel excitedly provided all the materials for the Mishkan to make up for the sin of the Golden Calf. The fact that the donation of the princes occurs at the end leads us to trace their mistake: According to the midrash, the princes felt slighted that Moshe didn't ask them personally for their donation toward the work of the Mishkan. So, they said, "Let the people donate whatever they will give, and we will bring what is missing." Yet they didn't expect that the Israelites would be so excited about the work of the Mishkan that they happily brought all their donations with *zerizut* (alacrity) early in the morning (*Shemot* 36:3). Two days later when the princes were ready to bring their donations, they were unable to, since Moshe had already commanded everyone to stop bringing any more donations (*ibid.* 6). The princes then became sorry that they did not merit to give donations for the Mishkan, and therefore they decided to donate materials for the garments of the Kohanim. G-d said, "My children הוֹתִיר */hotir* - 'brought more than needed,' yet the princes who were lazy have one letter missing from their name." The midrash reveals that the princes who naturally should be the first to donate did not have the proper excitement for this holy endeavor. The missing *yud* alludes to the missing unity of the princes with the rest of the people in the mitzvah of donating for the Mishkan (Midrash Tanchuma, *Parashat Naso*).

Making calculations about when and how to donate demonstrates a certain emotional coldness - an emotive distance from what is going on around us. Someone who is truly excited acts spontaneously out of love without calculating. When the princes discovered that their donations weren't needed, since the people had brought more than enough, they realized their mistake. They then became aware that deciding to bring their donations last constituted a certain spiritual sluggishness. They had desired to give last so that everyone would know the exact nature of their donation for the Mishkan. This arrogance about their uplifted position comprised a lack, and therefore their name was written without the *yud*. The midrash continues to tell that the princess learned from their mistake and at the dedication of the Tabernacle they were the first to sacrifice. Now they got the opportunity to atone for their arrogance by giving onyx stones that would be placed on the heart of Aharon to atone for them. In this way, it did become publicized which donation the princess brought, but not to their honor, on the contrary, everyone would know that the princess brought onyx stones to atone for their mistake of arrogance.

Gratitude for Giving

ספר שמות פרק לו פסוק ד וַיָּבִאוּ כָּל הַחֲכָמִים הָעֹשִׂים אֶת כָּל מְלָאכֶת הַקֹּדֶשׁ אִישׁ אִישׁ מִמְּלָאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר הִמָּה עֹשִׂים: (ה) וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵּאמֹר מְרִבִּים הָעָם לְהַבִּיא מִדֵּי הָעֶבֶדָה לְמִלְאכָה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתָהּ: (ו) וַיֹּצֵא מֹשֶׁה וַיַּעֲבִירוּ קוֹל בְּמַחֲנֶה לֵאמֹר אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה אֵל יַעֲשׂוּ עוֹד מְלָאכָה לְתִרְוַמַת הַקֹּדֶשׁ וַיִּכְלָא ה' הָעָם מִהַבִּיא: (ז) וְהַמְּלָאכָה הַיְתֵרָה דִּים לְכָל הַמְּלָאכָה לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתָהּ וְהוֹתִיר:

"Then all the wise men who were doing the work of the Holy came each one from his work, which they had been doing. They spoke to Moshe, saying: 'The people are bringing very much, more than is enough for the labor of the articles which Hashem had commanded to do.' So, Moshe commanded, and they announced in the camp, saying: 'Let no man or woman do any more work for the offering for the Holy.' So, the people stopped bringing." The work was sufficient for them for all the work, to do it and to leave over (*Shemot* 36:4-7).

I am struck by all the detail in this parsha about the gifts and the Mishkan, and it occurs to me that perhaps the giving of these details is the Torah's way of reminding us of how G-d sees and appreciates all the work and every single offering, no matter how simple or how ordinary. Let us grow in our awareness and gratitude for all the little and most regular gifts in our lives. Let us also be aware of G-d's constant appreciation that even our smallest contribution builds up our community, our families, and our world!

**Gratitude Focus for the Week of *Parashat Vayakhel* -
The Paradox of When to Give and When not to Give**

I've presented some contradictory insights about when to give beyond our means and when to set boundaries on our giving. This topic remains unresolved in my life. I do have moments when my heart lifts me to give beyond rational calculations. Yet at times, I do need to set my boundaries to accomplish my goals and live according to my life values. Here are some tips to work on the right balance in your giving.

Work on Your Self-Worth to Balance Your Giving and Receiving - Feeling Propelled to Always Give is Linked to Your Self-Worth. Many of us are challenged to balance giving and receiving in a healthy way, especially in terms of being open to receiving and embracing our own values and self-worth. When you give from a place of low self-esteem your giving isn't genuine as it emanates from wanting to give in order to feel good about yourself. To learn to give from a better place that will truly benefit the recipient, look into a possible conditioned victim or martyr energy within your family, your friends, and the society you grew up in. Can you decipher a pattern that is played out on repeat? Can you get help to release this emotional block in your life so you will be able to give from a wholehearted place.

Don't Overgive - While it's Tempting to Always Want to be the Giver, it Can be an Unhealthy Way to be in Relationships with Others. Overgiving can lead to resentment, burnout, and increased depression. If you don't feel joyful and energized by giving, you're probably giving too much or from the wrong place. When this happens, it's a sign that you need to take some time to restore the balance. After all, you can't fill another's cup from a dry well. Take the time to receive help, love, and care to ensure you're 'full' enough to then be able to give back.

Practice Balance in Your Giving and Receiving - It's important to be a genuine giver, but it's equally as important to learn how to receive. By learning to balance how much you give and how much you receive, you'll deepen your relationships and ensure that your well is always full enough so that you can give to others with joy.