

I have had the blessing of serving three wonderful, albeit very different, congregations throughout my rabbinic career. One was a large suburban in the Chicago area that had grown dramatically in its 25 year existence; the second a well-established urban congregation over 150 years old; the third this synagogue, now in its sixth decade with an active, multi-generation membership and (as you can tell from the unfinished parking lot and walls outside) a major building program to help us accommodate our solid growth. Despite the differences between these communities, it has been fascinating to hear the similarity of struggles at all three when it comes to money.

Here, as in the other two congregations, lay leaders have sought to contain costs, while seeking to convince the larger membership that it was important for them to maximize their contributions. In each place there were similar complaints when dues were raised. In our congregation one of the leadership's long term concerns is the high level of dues for those with the smallest income. The desire has been to get those blessed by God with more to pay more, enabling us to lower the burden on those making less.

To that end, a letter went out early this summer to remind people not only of their financial obligation, but of Judaism's understanding that those who can give the most ought to do so. Most responded more than generously, but someone told our Board a story that is the reason for my remarks tonight on what Judaism teaches about being generous. She said that when some friends of hers read the letter and heard that some in our community were not paying their fair share, they were incensed. "Do you mean to tell me that some people have not been honest?" So far, the person relating the story said, she was heartened by the response. But then came the shock. "Well," one person said, "if others aren't giving, I sure won't be either. Next year I'm giving less!" She was shocked. Instead of the reminder of acting fairly leading these people to be generous, the miserliness of others became the benchmark for their behavior.

It reminds me of a story about a rabbi that sought a donation from a prominent member in another community. After doing some investigating she called the individual to persuade him to make a contribution. "You have been so successful in your life. And last year I researched and found out that you made almost \$1 million in a real estate

deal. Yet you didn't give anything to charity. Wouldn't you like to give back to the community in some way?"

The person being solicited responded angrily, "First, did your research also show that my mother is dying after a long illness, and has medical bills that are several times her annual income?"

Embarrassed, the rabbi mumbled, "Um ... no."

Seeing the opening, the man continued, "Did you also found out that my brother, a disabled veteran, is blind and confined to a wheelchair?"

The shamefaced rabbi began to stammer out an apology, but was interrupted again, "Or that my sister's husband died in a traffic accident," the man's voice rising in indignation, "leaving her penniless with three children?"

The humiliated rabbi, completely beaten, said simply, "I had no idea ..."

On a roll, the person cut the rabbi off once again, "So if I don't give any money to them, why should I give any to you?"

How very different is the goal set forth for us in this week's Torah portion. The *parasha* opens with the people of Israel being told that when they are finally settled they should take the first fruit of their harvest and give it to God. As part of the act of giving the person donating is supposed to make a statement acknowledging that it is God who brought us into the land. The assumption behind this statement is that what the land produces is not achieved solely through the sweat of one's own brow. Rather, what we have is a gift from God – and to fail to acknowledge this is not only selfish, but to live without true awareness of the source of our bounty. After making this statement the Torah instructed the donor to "leave it (i.e. the basket of first fruits) before the Eternal your God and bow low ... (Then) you shall enjoy, together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst, all the bounty that the Eternal your God has bestowed upon you and your household." (Deuteronomy 26:10-11)

The goal of actually bringing one's donation, acknowledging the source of one's bounty and sharing it with others was, it is fair to say, to create in people a sense of generosity. In Hebrew the word for generosity is נדיבות *nedivut*. Because we live in a capitalist society, we tend to think of generosity as being associated with money. But

נדיבות is also a character trait that can involve our time, our possessions or that to which we direct our emotional energy.

In fact, giving money may not be the most generous act you can do. A dear friend of mine runs a program in another city that provides daily meals to those who are hungry. She takes responsibility for organizing the Jewish community to set up in a local church, cook, serve and clean up a dinner one evening each week. I was speaking to her husband this week, who told me that when she was in the hospital recently looking after her father she bumped into one of the food pantry's regular "clients." Recognizing her, he asked, "Can you give me a dollar or two for a cup of coffee?" She, however, knew that the money might be put to less honorable use, so she said, "C'mon. I'll take you for a coffee." And then, the husband finished, she took him out for lunch. She understood that in this case money was the easy thing to give. But her time – and even more, her sense of caring – was a much richer, more faithful act of נדיבות.

In his book *Everyday Holiness*, Alan Morinis, speaks about the many ways we set up obstacles to acting generously. Some rationalize, "if others are in need, let them work harder to achieve." We can become overloaded by the suffering in the world – and so turn from helping any one since we cannot help all. Some have been scarred those who were not generous to them, and so close off their own heart to others.

Do you recall the people I spoke about earlier – those who found out others were not giving, so they decided to give the synagogue less this year? I wonder what it is that led them to such callous and hardened a heart. Did it grow out of a feeling of being duped? "How foolish I've been to give, when others don't." But what creates this must be anger. Or maybe it is based in fear – that if I give I will somehow have too little, unable to provide all I need or all I want for myself. Yet anger or fear is simply the ego working overtime. "The ego," Morinis teaches, "tends to look on life in terms of scarcity and ownership and at the world as a zero-sum game: if I am to win, someone else must lose." (p.154)

Our traditions teach, in contrast, that there is enough for all – and that God provides us with what we need (if not all that we want). In fact, a society ruled by ego is one that much poorer than one where generosity (נדיבות) rules. One of my favorite Chasidic

stories is of a man who is taken by Elijah to see hell, then heaven. In hell everyone sits at a table loaded with every delicacy and delight. But the people have no elbows and so, they cannot eat. Or, at best, they grab a few morsels that they drop into their mouths. When he is taken to heaven, however, he sees the same scene – a table groaning under its load of food, and people with no elbows. But here, each person reaches out to feed the other. Instead of seeking to keep everything for themselves, by giving to others they actually learn that they were being generous to themselves.

In Judaism there are two ways to express generosity through money. The first is through *צדקה* *tzedakah*, which is not “charity”, but an obligated giving to a righteous cause. In Judaism that everyone is supposed to give, even those of meager means. First, this allows the poor to also feel the dignity of helping others and second, it creates a culture of giving throughout the community. If someone gives, but does so with a sour attitude, would you consider that *צדקה*? Jewish thinking would say it is. Although it is certainly less than ideal to give in an ungenerous way, it is better to do the right thing wrongly than not to do it at all.

A second level of generosity, however, is called *תרומה* *t'rumah*, which is an outright “gift” or “donation.” *תרומה* is not made out of any sense of responsibility, but grows out of a loving yearning of the heart. Most of us find it easy to be forthcoming with those we love – either because we hope to gain something in return or simply arising from wanting to do something for the person or people we care about. More difficult is being generous with those from whom we seemingly gain little (or maybe nothing).

As already mentioned, however, in giving to others we help both them and ourselves ... and we build a more heavenly, sacred society. The way to create a deeper sense of generosity, our traditions teach, is to simply be more generous. This sounds easier than it is in practice. This past week we were visiting our daughter in Montreal. Unlike New York City, where (for good or ill) there is little tolerance for beggars, the attitude north of the border is more forgiving. There are beggars going car to car at stoplights and people seeking donations every other street corner. While I gave to a few, I did not give to most. Feeling guilty, I was reminded of the sixteenth-century work,

אורחות צדיקים *Orchot Tzaddikim* ("The Paths of the Righteous") which teaches that "a person who gives a thousand gold pieces to a worthy person is not as generous as one who gives a thousand gold pieces on a thousand different occasions, each in its proper place." Why does this work say it is better to give more often? Because by acting in a generous manner we cultivate a generous heart. In essence, it is the opening of our wallets that trains our hearts. Thus, the next time I travel instead of getting rid of my pocket change (I don't know why, but I hate having it jingling in my pocket!), I think I'll keep a bit more small change to give to those who ask. Will it save the world? Maybe not, but it will help fix a little piece of it (even if that "piece" is in this somewhat hardened heart of mine).

A final aspect of נדיבות (generosity), of course, has nothing to do with giving money. It is connected to an openness of spirit. In the book of Exodus we read, "Whoever is of a willing heart, let that person bring it." (Exodus 25:1) Rabbi Simcha Zissel asked, "what is this 'it' that the person is supposed to bring?" He answered that what God truly seeks is not so much what we bring, but our willing heart.

As we come towards the Days of Awe this generosity of spirit is essential if we seek forgiveness (or it is sought of us). We need to be generous with ourselves, not berating ourselves overly much for what we left undone or did incorrectly. And when others seek our understanding, let us not judge them too harshly. Rather, let us have an open mind and willing heart, accepting with love whatever it is that others can bring.

To conclude, consider the many blessings you have been given – and know that it is by the grace of God that they are yours. If you keep what you have too close it will turn out to be less than you think, and nothing you can truly keep. Give what you own more generously and you will not only be a blessing to others, but create a more loving spirit within yourself. You cannot stop others from being judgmental, selfish, stingy and miserly. But you can control yourself. Do not let the pettiness of some wear you down. Open your heart. Open your soul. Be generous. And then you will create a heavenly world – one where no one has it all, but each has more than enough.