

"I GAVE ALREADY"
The Pathos, Humor, and Religious Significance of Charity

Our Sidra of this morning tells us about the commandment to build the mishkan (sanctuary) which accompanied the Israelites through the desert. But it prefaces this commandment with instructions on how to raise the money for the sanctuary by means of contributions.

וְקָחָה לִּי תְרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְבַּר לִבּוֹ תְּתַחַו אֶת
תְּרוּמַתִּי... וַעֲשׂוּ לִּי מִקְדָּשׁ וּשְׁכֹנֹתַי בְּתוֹכָם.

"Take for Me an offering; of every man whose heart maketh him willing ye shall take My offering... And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:1-8).

This is an appropriate time, therefore, to speak of the act of giving, of charity or tzedakah.

Now, this is a broad and important theme. There is a considerable amount of Halakhah on charity; there is a Jewish theology of charity; there is also a Jewish sociology of charity, i.e., how the community must orient itself in implementing its principles; and there is a psychology of charity. It is most interesting for us to focus on the Jewish psychology of charity, for we will find in it universal themes -- as well as pathos, humor, and religious significance.

Let me begin with a complaint that I often hear, and it is frequently directed at me. Our Jewish community in this country, and in other countries as well, has developed forms of fund-raising that are subtly coercive, and include various forms of "arm-twisting." Hence, resentment is often expressed against the parlour meetings and appeals and card-calling and solicitations and theatre parties, and all the other various methods by which people are subjected to a demand, usually in public, that they make a specific contribution. The charge is that this takes the fun and the feeling of virtue out of giving; it denudes charity of its voluntaristic element; it deprives the donors of the feeling of accomplishing a mitzvah, in free will and out of love.

Is this charge true? It certainly is!

Why then do we often resort to these various forms of "hard-sell?" Because we have before us a contest of two goods, a competition between two virtues, as two needs strive for our attention. The first of these is the need for the donor to experience the sense of moral uplifting and exaltation, the feeling of making a free-will offering, of opening his or her heart, of participating in the divine act of hessed, givingness or lovingkindness.

The second element is not the subjective but the objective one: the very real need to provide for those who suffer hunger or thirst or nakedness or pain or loneliness, to care for the poor and the disadvantaged and for the spiritual and religious needs of the community at large.

Clearly, the first element cannot abide coercion, for when we force someone to give we diminish the subjective experience of wholesomeness and goodness. But just as clearly the second element requires some form of coercion, because otherwise, realistically, we shall never be able to provide for the minimum necessary for the survival of individuals and of the community.

Hence, we must make every effort to maintain both elements, not to reject completely any one of them.

Rashi, in one of his first comments on this week's Sidra, tells us that *שש תרומות אמורות כאן*, that the Sidra is talking about three different kinds of contributions. One was the *תרומת אדנים*, the contribution made to acquire the metal sockets which were the foundations of the Sanctuary. Here everyone had to pay a specific amount -- *בקע גגוללות*, a half a shekel for each person. The second contribution was *תרומת המזבח*, the donations for the altar, whereby everyone would participate in paying for the *קרבנות ציבור*, the public sacrifices which were offered twice daily and the *Musaf* on every Saturday and holiday. This too was a very specific form which everyone was required to give, whether he wanted to or not, and it was the same amount, *בקע גגוללות*. The first two offerings, therefore, were fixed and forced. The third one, the *תרומת המשכן*, the donation for the building of the Sanctuary, was *נדבת כל אחד ואחד* -- it was a free-will offering, as the heart of each person dictated to him.

We see, then, that Judaism attempted to retain both elements, that of coercion in order to respond to the objective need of the individuals or community, and that of the free-will offering in order to provide for the subjective need for moral uplifting.

Interestingly, the emphasis of our Sages throughout our tradition is more on charity as obligation, as a must, than on charity as voluntary, and something done freely. It is a truism which all of us are acquainted with that this concept is inherent in the etymology of the words we use. *Tzedakah* comes from the word *tzeddek*, which means justice; it is only right that we give to others. We must do so because what we possess is not ours in the first place, it is only something which the Creator has entrusted to us, and we must therefore share it according to His decision. The word *charity*, however, comes from the Latin *caritas*, which means love, and hence implies that we give primarily as a result of a subjective experience of compassion and sympathy.

This bias in favor of the objective over the subjective needs, is reflected in the commentary of the Netziv (in his "*העמיק דבר*"). This commentator is shocked that the contribution for the building of the Sanctuary should be considered completely a free-will offering. How is this consistent, he asks, with the principle that *ממשכנים על הצדקה* -- that the Jewish courts can seize the property of a man in order to force him to make an equitable contribution? Or with the principle that *כופין זה את זה לבלות בית הכנסת*, that in a community where there is no synagogue, the people can elect officials who will assess the ability of every individual to give and assign him a specific amount which he must give, whether he wants to or not? The response of the Netziv is that the first two offerings, that for the *אדנים* or sockets and for the altar, were completely fixed, so that one could give neither more nor less -- *העשרה לא ירבה* -- one must give only half a *shekel*; not more, not less. With regard to this third contribution, however, that for the building of the Sanctuary, here everyone was forced to give a minimum, but each person could increase that contribution according to his *נדבת לב*, the feeling of his own heart. Hence, the clear preference of Judaism, as it is expressed in the words of the Netziv, is to consider the objective need more than the subjective experience.

Even more remarkable in this respect is the following passage from the Talmud (R.H. 4a):

*האומר סלע זו לצדקה בשביל שיחיו בני ובטביל שאזכה
לעולם הבא הרי זו צדקה גמורה*

"If one makes a contribution on condition that his children survive and live or that he receive eternal life as a reward, this contribution is considered complete *tzedakah*."

Consider how remarkable and even shocking this statement is. If one would put on tefillin or eat matzah on such conditions, we would condemn him as a vulgar individual who seeks to turn all of religion into a commercialized negotiation with God: "God, I'll do You a favor by performing a mitzvah, and You give me a free ticket into Gan-Eden." There is hardly anything more denigrating to the quality of religious life. Yet, if one indulges his own desire for self-interest and commercialism with regard to charity, we consider the gift צדקה גמורה, a complete act of charity! Not only that, but according to the version of most of our texts of the Talmud, we say הר' זה צד'יק גמור, not only is the charity complete charity, but the man who makes this contribution is a complete Zaddik!

Why is that so? Because when your fellow man is hungry, when his children are sick, when he suffers and cries out in his loneliness, then you have only one overriding concern: feed him, clothe him, assuage his pain, reduce his suffering, provide for his needs -- and do not worry about the pristine state of your own religious experience, your own feelings of moral satisfaction and nobility!

And yet, how much more beautiful if one can combine both of these elements, the provision for objective needs of one's fellows and the subjective feeling of decency and nobility and good spirits. Indeed, separate from the mitzvah to give tzedakah, is a special commandment of the Torah addressed to the donor concerning his emotional state: וְלֹא יֵרָע זָבֶבךָ בְּתֶתְךָ לוֹ, "and thy heart shall not feel bad when thou giveth unto him" (Deut. 15:10).

It is in this realm that the element of humor enters. The request for tzedakah is the greatest spur to inventiveness ever invented; it has done more to stimulate sluggish imaginations than anything else I have ever known. The excuses we devise when we are approached for charity are often brilliant, witty, and sometimes even amusing; they would be funny if the need would not be so acute.

Of all these inventive reasons, the one least imaginative but most popular is, "I gave already!" Why is this humorous? Because this argument is advanced by people who ate already and yet eat today again! -- by people who already have a closet full of suits or dresses, yet have no intention of failing to purchase more such garments. It is uttered by people who received their wages last week and have every intention of receiving them again this week, who got their dividends last month and expect to get them again regularly.

Now, I do not say this without some real sympathy for those of us -- and it includes all of us, myself as well as others -- who are beset by a constant stream of requests, who are overwhelmed by all kinds of pressures for charities of all kinds. There seems to be no end to the demands to contribute to United Jewish Appeal and to Bonds, to yeshivot and hospitals, to private individuals and organizations of all sorts. Certainly, each person must set his priorities, and distribute his largesse according to his own values.

Nevertheless, whether we give or even decline to give, it must always be with a proper attitude: with sympathy, with understanding, with respect, and especially with sensitivity.

And not only am I personally sympathetic to the problem of donors in these difficult times through which we are living (and ב"ה, we are all in the class of donors), but the Torah itself is understanding of and sympathetic with everyone in every act of giving tzedakah. The Torah is not unmindful of how personally difficult it is for a person to contribute to tzedakah under any circumstances.

The Mishnah tells us in Avot in the name of the great R. Akiba: הכל לפי רוב המצוה; simply stated, that means that everything, i.e., reward, depends upon how much we do. But that explanation is not satisfying to me. After all, the concept that reward and punishment depend upon our performance on earth is so simple and fundamental, that it did not have to await R. Akiba. The second paragraph of the Shema already taught us this principle, as well as much the rest of Torah. What then did R. Akiba mean to teach us?

Here we must turn to the brilliant and insightful commentary of Maimonides. The Rambam maintains that R. Akiba was contrasting his statement, הכל לפי רוב המצוה, with the alternative of הכל לפי גודל המצוה. In other words, R. Akiba maintains that our reward, or the very virtue of our act, does not depend upon the size and impact of what we do, as much as upon how often we do it. For instance, a man may give \$365 by signing one check at one time to a charity, or he may give a dollar every day throughout the year. From one point of view, it makes no difference which he does. If we are considering גודל המצוה, the simple size or amount, both are equal. But R. Akiba insists that הכל לפי רוב המצוה, that it depends how often we perform the act of charity, regardless of the amount. Therefore, greater virtue inheres in the act of contributing if one does it more often. One who gives 365 times is far nobler than one who performs one act, even if both give the same amount! The reason is quite simple: The Torah recognizes that every time a man has to give something that belongs to him, that he may have acquired by dint of hard work, he feels an inner reluctance and a powerful resistance against giving it away. Hence, that reluctance must be overcome, and the act of overcoming it is not always contingent upon the amount that is given. Every time I give, even a little amount, it is required of me to train myself, to habituate myself, to overcome that resistance, and every time I do so, I perform a new mitzvah.

Allow me to conclude by a touching illustration of the pathos in this psychological insight of R. Akiba as interpreted by the Rambam. It is something I only recently heard.

About 170 years ago, shortly after R. Hayyim of Volozhin had build his great yeshiva, he found that he was very much in need of 50,000 rubles, which today would be equivalent to approximately half a million dollars. In order to raise the money, he travelled to the large city of Minsk, where there were two distinguished philanthropists, both extremely wealthy, scholarly, and pious. The two were partners, and their names were R. Barukh Zablodowitch and R. Hersh Pines. R. Hayyim approached R. Barukh for the contribution. R. Barukh asked R. Hayyim to stay in Minsk for about a month while he tries to raise the money. Meanwhile, he provided him with room and board and a fine library so that R. Hayyim could continue with his studies. After two weeks, R. Barukh notified R. Hayyim that he already raised half of the amount, or about 25,000 rubles. Two weeks later, he informed him that he had raised the entire amount.

A short time thereafter, before R. Hayyim left Minsk for Volozhin, R. Hersh and R. Barukh both approached R. Hayyim and they asked him to be the judge in a Din Torah or suit brought by R. Hersh against his partner R. Barukh. R. Hayyim agreed to hear the case. In his suit, R. Hersh charged that the two of them had agreed that they would be partners in everything pertaining to money, not only in their main business. Now, charged R. Hersh, R. Barukh had reneged and had not kept up to his agreement -- because he gave the entire 50,000 rubles to R. Hayyim for the yeshiva, and forgot or neglected to take R. Hersh in as a partner in this deal!

After the Din Torah was settled, however it may have been decided, R. Hayyim turned to R. Barukh and said: "Now that we have heard the complaints of

R. Hersh against you, I too have a complaint. Tell me, since you decided to give the money out of your own pocket, why couldn't you give it to me as soon as I came here, instead of making me spend four weeks in Minsk, time which I could have spent so valuably teaching in Volozhin?"

To this, R. Barukh responded, "Rabbi, do you think it is so easy to give money yourself? I did not raise this from others but gave it all myself. And I did not do it all at once. Instead, I divided the 50,000 rubles into four weeks or 28 days. Every day I made a decision to give that certain amount. And the next day I decided all over again to add that amount. That means that every day I had to make a new decision, I had to force it out of myself, I had to pull out that amount out of my mind and my pocket with the pliers of my own persistence. It took me one whole month to raise the entire amount from myself for you!"

Here we have a living illustration of what the Rambam taught and R. Akiba taught before him. Every day was a new act of heroism in the giving of tzedakah.

"And this," concluded R. Barukh, "is what the Torah meant when it said וְיָקָחוּ לִי תְרוּמָה, 'let them take for Me an offering.' This does not refer only to God, but לִי means 'from me,' that is, every individual from himself and make the contribution."

Perhaps this is the real answer. Giving is rarely a pleasure. If there is a pleasure, it comes later on when we see the results. At the time we give, it usually hurts.

So that the bias in favor of coercion in raising funds is a justifiable one not only from the point of view of social needs, but also on the psychological basis of the inner resistance to giving. We must give, whether we like it or not, and usually we do not. But how much greater if we pull it out of ourselves instead of waiting for others to force it out of us. And how much greater yet if we do it, despite all, with tenderness and compassion and sensitivity and respect.

Then our tzedakah becomes ennobling, exalting, and purifying.