

WAKING UP

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

Giving. The Rebbe M'Sanz was completely infatuated with this fundamental midah. He possessed such a burning desire to give tzedakah, that every day he could retire without first donating every cent that he possessed to the needy. One night he could not fall asleep, and got out of bed and looked around the house. After much searching he found a single coin, and immediately ran to give it to tzedakah. Only then was he able to retire.

Most of us are able to fall asleep even on a day when we did not give any tzedakah. However, one day a year, our Sages obligated us to try and be in some measure like the Sanzer Rebbe. On Purim, every Jew must give at least two donations to the poor. The more that we exercise this vital faculty, the more that we will inculcate within ourselves the desire to give (based on Bach and Magen Avraham 695,12 and Rambam, Hilchos Tzedaka).

From the halachah it is clear that the point of this mitzvah is not only to enable the needy to enjoy a Purim seudah, but to cultivate the characteristic of giving within ourselves. Therefore even a poor person who is supported by charity is obligated to distribute Matanos L'evyonim (Mishna Berura 694,1). However he does not have to suffer in order to fulfill it. If he gives to two aniyim, and they return the money back to him, they have all fulfilled a mitzvah of Matanos L'avyonim (ibid. 694,2).

Unlimited Celebration

"All tzedakah collected for Purim should be used for Purim" (Bava Metzia 78b). Generally the amount of tzedakah distributed depends on the need. Why did our Sages find exception regarding Matanos L'evyonim, limiting their use solely to Purim?

Wine, meat, hors d'oeuvre and pastries, all play a significant role in creating a joyous Purim seudah. Since the amount of money that any person needs to have a "freilicher Purim" is a very subjective matter, our Sages wanted to make sure that no one who needs tzedakah would come out short-changed. They therefore decreed that all of the money collected for Purim should be made available for the aniyim. Even though adopting this practice might wind up giving the aniyim more than they actually need, since Purim is a day of rejoicing without limitation, being overly generous does not concern us (Rashi, Haghos Ashri, ibid.)

Making all of the tzedakah money available to the aniyim seems like a good idea in a city which has many poor people. However if a person lives in a large community which only houses two or three poor people, they can surely enjoy Purim with much less money than the amount which will be

collected. Should all the tzedakah still be distributed among these few aniyim?

Halachah L'Maaseh, money collected for Purim, can not be given to a different tzedakah. Therefore in a community where there will be a surplus of Matanos L'evyonim, it is preferable for a majority of the individuals to set aside the amount that one would generally allocate for Matanos L'evyonim, and give it to another charity (Shulchan Aruch 694,2). [However today b'tzaroseinu harabim, there are plenty of opportunities to give to worthy causes all over the world.]

An Outstretched Arm

"Whoever stretches out their hand on Purim should be given tzedakah" (Talmud Yerushalmi, Megilah 1,4). All year long a Jew is meant to insure that his tzedakah money goes to either poor people or worthy causes, and not merely to pad someone else's bank account. On Purim, we give every adult (or a clearly needy child) who asks, without exception.

On an individual level this is fine, a person has the free choice to give to whoever he wants. What about the gabayim (managers of the tzedakah funds); can they be equally generous with other people's money? Although the truly needy certainly have first preference, since Purim is a day of "banqueting and rejoicing", some Rishonim say that the gabayim are technically allowed to give to anyone who asks (Nemuke Yosef, 48b; Ramban; Ritva). However Halachah L'Maaseh since a person must make sure to give Matanos L'evyonim to at least two "real" aniyim, one should specify his preference beforehand (Shulchan Aruch 694,1).

Half-Shekels

In addition to the obligation of Matanos L'evyonim, there is also a mitzvah to give machatzis hashekel (i.e. three coins of the half denomination of the country where one resides), to tzedakah. Most have the custom to give them before Mincha on Ta'anis Esther (Rema 694,1), but some poskim rule that this mitzvah should be done on the morning of Purim, before the Megilah reading (Magen Avraham).

Technically speaking, machatzis hashekel only applies to individuals who were obligated to give it in the times of the Beis HaMikdash. Some confine this to males over the age of twenty, while others include all boys past bar-mitzvah (Mishna Berura 694,5). However other attribute mystical significance to this mitzvah, revealing that these coins have the power to enact Divine forgiveness. Therefore custom dictates that three half shekels should be given for every member of one's family (Kaf HaChaim 694,27). Nevertheless this is only a side benefit, and one should give them for the mitzvah's sake, and not with intention for kaparah (Darchei Moshe 694,1).

Stage Two

Once having developed a desire to distribute tzedakah to the poor, the stage is set for internalizing the next phase of the fine art of giving. We should now use this attribute to foster camaraderie between Jews through Mishloach Manos, sending two choice portions of food to at least one friend

(Shulchan Aruch 695,4).

The optimum fulfilment of Mishloach Manos is to give portions which can be used for the seudah, such as meat. Since beverages play an important part in a meal, they are also considered a food item for Mishloach Manos. Although some opinions permit raw food, cooked items certainly are preferable (Mishna Berura 695,20)

The quality of the manos should be in line with the standard of living of the receiver. Although cookies and popcorn might be sufficient for an individual of low or average means, if possible a rich person should be sent finer cuisine (Biyur Halacha citing Yerushalmi). Wealthy individuals should also try to send respectable portions, since most people expect to receive generous gifts from them (as implied from Megilah 7b).

Abaye bar Avin and Rav Chanina bar Avin used to exchange Purim meals with each other (ibid.). Although Rashi understands that these two Amoraim used to rotate who would make the Seudah each Purim, most Rishonim explain that every year they switched meals with each other. From here the poskim derive that if one can not afford to send Mishloach Manos, swaping seudos is considered an adequate substitute (Shulchan Aruch ibid.).

Even though women are generally exempt from time bound mitzvos, they are obligated in Matanaos L'evyonim and Mishloach Manos, as well as the rest of the mitzvos of Purim (Rema 695,4). Since they were also included in the decree to be destroyed and anihilated, and Esther played an integral part in the Jewish people's salvation, women are expected to take an active role in publicizing these miracles (Bach, Taz 694). Although a single adult woman should certainly take this into consideration, a married woman should also be careful to make sure that her obligations are fulfilled (Mishna Berura 695,25).

The Secret of Purim

The greatest of kabbalistic masters, the Ari z"l, described Yom Kippur as Yom Ke"Purim" (the day which resembles Purim). He viewed Purim's kedushah with such sublime awe, that even Yom Kippur paled in the face of this holy day. How can we simple Jews latch onto the incredible potential that lies burried within what has evolved into one of the most misunderstood days of the Jewish calendar?

"It is better to give more money to Matanos L'evyonim than one spends on Mishloach Manos and Seudas Purim, for there is no joy as great and magnificent as gladdening the hearts of the poor, orphans, widows and converts. By bringing joy to these individuals one emulates the Divine Presence as the verse says [Hashem] pick up the spirit of the downtrodden, and lifts the heart of the lowly" (Rambam, Hilchos Megilah 2,17).

Herein lies the secret of unlocking the untapped holiness of Purim. Think about the Rebbe of Sanz who couldn't sleep at night knowing that there was some money in his house that could be used to

picks up the spirit of the downtrodden or lift the heart of the lowly. Give generously, and when you feel that you are "given out", give some more, and more, and more...

"The more food parcels that one sends to friends on Purim, the better it is" (Rambam ibid 2,15). After your home looks like the Sanzer Rebbis house did every night, think about the neighbor that you haven't spoken to for the last year, and neither of you remember why. Brainstorm for any possibility to make someone happy; your spouse, children, friends, enemies or any Jew that you happen to bump into on the street, and without thinking too much more just do it. Knock down every barrier that stops you from being the paradigm of kindness the rest of the year, and in their place, for one day erect a new you. Welcome to Purim.

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