

CHAPTER 3, MISHNA 8(B): TESTING G-D

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Elazar of Bartosa said: Give Him from His own, for you and your possessions are His. And so regarding King David does the verse state, 'For everything is from You, and from Your hands have we given to You' (I Chronicles 29:14).

Last week we began to "quantify" the advice of our mishna, to put flesh and sinews on the very broad injunction of the Sages that we give G-d that which is His. As we saw, the Torah obligates us in very specific fashion how we are to be generous to G-d: how and to what extent we are to devote our selves and our possessions to the service of the Almighty. And as we saw further, the intent seems to be much more than that we simply be generous. It is rather that we must see everything we were blessed with as a gift from G-d. Giving charity is not so much an expression of our own generosity. It is more an admission that all that we have is truly G-d's, and that we, as His agents, must dispense it in the manner He wishes.

There is a fascinating corollary to the above, one which sheds a great deal of light on both our relationship with our money and our Creator.

Regarding the mitzvah (obligation) of tithing our crops, the Torah commands us: "You shall surely tithe all the produce of your seed which your field puts forth every year" (Deuteronomy 14:22). The Talmud (Ta'anis 9a) notes the double language -- "You shall **surely** tithe." (The literal translation is "tithe, you shall tithe," but English translations tend to paraphrase this accentuating text as "surely tithe.") The Sages, based on this and on the similarity between the words tithe ("asair") and wealth ("oshair"), infer the hidden meaning of the text: "Tithe so that you will become wealthy." Thus, being more charitable, rather than draining our resources, is our ticket to financial success.

And the Torah promises further. In the Book of Malachi G-d exhorts the people: "Bring all the tithes to the storehouse [of the Temple]... and test Me in this," says the L-rd of hosts, "if I will not open for you the doors of the heavens and pour out to you blessing without limit" (Malachi 3:10). G-d again promises us that if we are charitable He will reward us -- without limit.

But the verse goes further. G-d says we can test Him in this. Try it out! Give more charity and see the results: does G-d deliver on His promise? (I leave this as an exercise for the reader...) ;-) But in all seriousness, if we want a little dose of belief in G-d, a little strengthening of our faith, if we'd like to see G-d at work up close in our lives, all we have to do is give more charity -- and take note of the results. (Oh, and while we're at it, Torah.org is always short on cash...) ;-)

(There is a synagogue in my neighborhood with a fantastic Judaica library. The story as I was told is that a certain businessman was in need of reviving his foundering business ventures and donated a large sum to the synagogue. His business immediately began to recover. And he has since become a regular and generous donor -- perhaps as much for his own sake as well as the temple's.)

Now philosophically speaking all of this should strike us as being very atypical. In general we have no right to "test" G-d. ("I will believe in You only if You give me a sign or if You grant my wish.") It is our obligation to seek and discover G-d. He has planted more than enough evidence to allow His discovery -- commanding us and challenging us to seek Him out. But we must never expect Him to come over and reveal Himself to us on our own terms or in the manner we expect. **We** must approach **G-d**, not vice versa. We must not come with our own demands ("or else we won't believe in You"). We approach G-d through prayer, with humility and contrition -- and hope that He will accept us.

In a similar vein, prayer is not a means of "getting what we want," of making our demands on G-d and expecting Him to deliver -- and certainly not of hinging our own belief in Him upon if He passes our tests. If our prayers are not answered, we must simply assume that G-d knows better. Or to state it differently, G-d might very well be answering us -- but the answer is no. And regardless of whether or not we feel G-d is giving us the answers we want to hear, we must go on praying and believing, simply accepting that G-d alone knows best.

Yet charity is the exception to all of this. In this one area, we may test G-d, being more charitable and fully expecting Him to reciprocate. Why is this so? Is it simply because G-d knows how difficult it is to part with our savings, and so He grants us this special guarantee? Why does G-d seem to reveal Himself more here than anywhere else?

On a simple level, I believe there is a great deal of truth to the fact that if we demonstrate to G-d that we know how to use our money properly, He will entrust us with more of it. We have shown ourselves reliable stewards of His largesse. And so there is perhaps a very logical and practical reason why charity assures our monetary success. But I feel the true answer to this is far more profound.

Our mishna stated that we must give G-d that which is truly His. And if we do, as Deuteronomy and Malachi promise, we can rest assured G-d will grant us in kind. The reason is not simply because G-d recognizes our reluctance to part with our wealth -- and certainly not in order to prove to man that G-d exists. It is because in being charitable we realize we belong to G-d. The attitude our mishna asked of us is that we recognize all is truly a gift from G-d. And if we give our money, our time, and our talents with this in mind -- with the awareness that we must be charitable because it is all G-d's to begin with -- then we have made ourselves G-d's. And at that point, G-d will look after us. We are not stubborn and independent entities, begrudgingly parting with our hard-earned incomes in reluctant acquiescence to a Divine injunction. We give because we belong to G-d. We are G-d's --

and G-d takes care of His own.

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