

REFINED GLUTTONY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

This will be the entitlement of the kohanim from the people. From those who slaughter – whether an ox or a sheep – he shall give the foreleg, the jaws, and the abomasum.

Be'er Yosef: Collectively, they are simply called *matnos kehunah* – priestly gifts. The designation is misleading. It leaves ample room for us to assume that these priestly gifts are possessed of great *kedushah*, just like their “relative,” *terumah*.

We know, however, that the two are vastly dissimilar. It is a great *aveirah* for a commoner to eat *terumah*, or even for a kohen to eat it in a manner that profanes its *kedushah*, such as eating it while *tameh*. No such restriction encumbers the *matnos kehunah*. The *kohen* who receives them can feed them to his animals, or sell them, or gift them to a non-Jew.

We would tend, therefore, to dismiss their importance. Chazal, however, thought differently and taught us a beautiful lesson. The gemara^[2] relates that Abaye used to seize the *matanos* when he had an opportunity, in order to demonstrate his love for mitzvos. (Responding to evidence elsewhere in the Torah, he subsequently modified his behavior, so as not to have to act in the undignified and uncouth manner of other *kohanim*. This does not alter the validity of his first position, which was to take advantage of every opportunity to gain the *matanos* for himself.)

What could be so important about a mitzvah with no inherent holiness – that apparently was given to the *kohanim* entirely for their own pleasure? What could seizing the *matanos* demonstrate, other than a strong sense of self-interest?

It could – and did – demonstrate the very opposite. By seizing the *matanos*, R. Chisda hoped to display proper gratitude. He wished to show appreciation to Hashem for having made such a gift available to him. If Hashem made it available, then it was an opportunity he should value and take for himself. (It is perhaps for this reason that R. Chisda specifies that the *kohanim* should eat the *matanos* in the manner of “greatness,” i.e. roasted, and served with mustard. Turning the *matanos* into gourmet dishes attaches prominence and honor to them, which are warranted by our appreciation of His *chesed*.)

With this approach, we can unlock a difficult passage in the gemara.^[3] R Chisda held two sets of *matanos* in hand, and pledged to give them to whomever would tell him a new Torah thought from

Rav, who was his rebbi. Rava bar Mechasya complied, conveying to R. Chisda a teaching of Rav's about the protocol of giving a gift. (He has us recall the fact that before Hashem gave us the mitzvah of Shabbos He announced it great *kedushah*, which would otherwise not have been understood by the people. We should do the same when we give a gift, not giving anonymously, but ensuring that the recipient becomes aware of the gift.) R. Chisda gave the *matanos* as promised. Rava bar Mechasya exclaimed how greatly R. Chisda cherished the teachings of his rebbi, Rav, and supported this observation by citing another teaching of Rav: "The cloak of fine wool is precious to the one who wears it." R Chisda then exclaimed that this second teaching of Rav was even more valuable than the first, and had he had more another set of *matanos* in hand, he would have given them as well to whomever brought it to his attention!

The passage is enigmatic from beginning to end. If R. Chisda wished to demonstrate his great love of Torah, why was his offer restricted to the Torah of Rav? Should he not have shown the same excitement for a new Torah insight offered by anyone else? Why did R. Chisda restrict his generosity to *matnos kehunah*? We know he was a wealthy man, who could have afforded to offer a general bounty to anyone coming forward with undiscovered teachings of Rav. Additionally, the entire exchange seems too commercial. It is forbidden to receive payment for Torah teachings; how could R Chisda offer the payment, and Rava bar Mechasya accept it?

The approach we used earlier sheds light on the entire passage.

1. Chisda found himself in possession of a large windfall gift – not one, but two sets of *matnos kehunah*. He had made a point of accepting them, in order to show his great love for the mitzvah. No sooner had he accepted them than he endeavored to give them away. He wished to demonstrate that his eagerness to take the *matanos* did not owe to his desire for some good cuts of meat, but only to his cherishing the mitzvah. Giving them away to another person showed that he was not a glutton.

This gesture was still unsatisfactory. By giving the *matanos* away, he potentially cheapened them! He implied that they were of little importance or use to him! Therefore, he stipulated that he would only give them to someone who taught him a new teaching of his rebbi – something to which he attached very great importance! He did not offer a reward to anyone who would teach him any Torah; it is forbidden to receive payment for words of Torah. He restricted the offer to the *matnos kehunah* in hand, because his sole interest was to demonstrate his love of the mitzvah – and he accomplished this only by linking the *matanos* to Torah from his rebbi, something that people understood he cherished to an unusual extent.

All the pieces fit together. We stand in admiration of the everyday conversation of our great Sages.

[1] Based on Be'er Yosef, Devarim 18:3

[\[2\]](#) Chulin 133A

[\[3\]](#) Shabbos 10B
