

THE ABUNDANCE OF ACTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"You shall surely give him, and do not let your heart sink when you give him, because since you have done this thing, HaShem your G-d will bless you in all your actions and in all your activities." [15:10]

Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, says "you shall surely give him" -- even 100 times. And Maimonides, on the Mishnah in the Chapters of the Fathers 3:19, "and all is according to the abundance of the action," says: "levels of elevation do not reach a person through the greatness of one act, so much as through an abundantly large number of acts." As much as one tremendous, selfless act can have a great impact on a person and change him or her for the better, 100 smaller deeds will eventually have an even larger influence.

The Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisrael Meyer HaCohen Kagan, says that this explains how we should give Tzedakah, charity. He says it is better for an individual if he or she gives 100 individual dollars to 100 poor people, than all to one person. This way, one becomes accustomed to fight against his miserly inclinations 100 times, and it becomes easier to win in the future. Furthermore, giving Tzedakah becomes a completely natural act, given that one has become accustomed to giving by doing so such a large number of times.

Of course, there is an implied criticism here against giving charity by placing a large sum of money into a fund, and then allowing the directors of the fund to handle all of the disbursements without further involvement. The Chofetz Chaim compared this to a real-life situation in his town of Radin, Poland. He lived at the time when the town first purchased an electrical generator and wired all the houses and courtyards with electric lighting. One evening something broke within the machine, and darkness descended upon all of the houses and streets, and even in the synagogue.

He pointed out that before they had electricity, every house had a kerosene light -- and if in one particular house the kerosene ran out, or the wick burnt away, or the glass broke, that only that one house would be dark. But when everyone is dependent upon one machine, darkness spreads over the entire city if that machine breaks for any reason.

From here, he said, one must learn to not simply write one large check to the Federation (I didn't know that they had them in Poland, but Rabbi Shmuel Greineman spells out "Federations" in Hebrew letters, in his collection of the Chofetz Chaim's discourses on the Torah reading). It is certainly more

inconvenient to receive people individually, or to respond to their mailings. But if people give individually, then if a particular organization, institution or impoverished family is turned away by a few donors, the institution or family can nonetheless find sustenance by turning to others. Whereas if everything is placed in hands of a few designated representatives, then if those representatives are unresponsive to a particular appeal, then the entire city loses the merit of supporting that poor family or Torah institution -- and darkness descends over the whole city.

So when appeals come our way, let us learn to respond individually, to think as individuals, to grow through our own charity!

Good Shabbos,
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