

FROM HAND TO HEART

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"If there shall be a destitute person among you... you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand against your destitute brother... Give him, you shall surely give him. And let your heart not feel bad when you give him, for in return for this matter, Hashem, your G-d, will bless you in all your deeds, and in everything to which your hands go out." (15: 7-10)

This section of Parshas Re'eh, which deals with how we are to treat the poor, is replete with repetition. "You shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand." "Give, you shall surely give." "In all your deeds, and in everything to which your hands go out." It seems the Torah is stressing that there are two aspects to giving tzedakah (charity). What are they?

The Bobover Rebbe zt"l explains that there are, in general, two ways to give: generously or resentfully. Anyone who has ever gone through the experience of having to collect charity, whether for himself or for others less fortunate than him, can vouch for this. There are those who see giving tzedakah as a natural extension of their wealth. After all, they reckon, what I have is a gift from Hashem! How can I be so callous as to refuse to share His gift with those less fortunate than myself?

For others, giving charity does not come naturally. Whether it is because they see themselves as "self-made," or because they view the poor as lazy and un-industrious, they resent having to divide their wealth among others. Nevertheless, they give, because they are ashamed to be seen as miserly and closefisted.

Perhaps we could classify these two types of charitable individuals as a) Those who give with their hearts, and b) Those who give with their hands. We often judge our mitzvah performance based on how much "heart" went into the mitzvah. Physical performance of the mitzvah, we agree, is but one aspect of overall observance. One who "does what he has to do" out of a sense of obligation, but with no feeling, while fulfilling "the letter of the law," fails to grasp its "spirit."

On the other hand, while we are taught to perform mitzvos out of joy and pureness-of-heart, we all experience times when we're just "not in the mood." Even the most generous of spirit sometimes just don't feel like giving. The Torah stresses that we should not err by making our mitzvos "mood-dependent." If our state of mind allows us give tzedakah with joy and generosity; wonderful - "Do not harden your heart!". If we find ourselves "uninspired," and give only out of a sense of obligation and shame, then so be it - "Nor close your hand." But give!

"The Jews are a holy nation! - There are those who have the desire to give, yet have not the means.

And there are those who have the means, yet not the desire. (Talmud, Chullin 7b)"

Tosafos (ibid.) questions: It is understood that one who has the desire but no means is still meritorious. After all, if he had, he would surely give. But one who has the means to give, yet no desire to do so, in what way is he holy? They answer that although he has no desire to give, he still gives out of a sense of shame. When we do - even out of obligation - we are still holy. Holiness doesn't depend on whether we feel holy, whole, or spiritual. Ultimately, we are beings of actions, and will be judged accordingly.

The Torah promises that if you will give, "Hashem will bless you in all that you do, and in everything to which your hands go out." The hand "going out" refers to one who does with his hands, but not necessarily with his heart. (By the Akeidas Yitzchak (the binding of Isaac to the Altar) the Torah says, "And Avraham sent out his hand to slaughter his son (Bereishis 22:10)." His body was completely dedicated to following Hashem's command - so his hand went out. But since ultimately Hashem did not want him to sacrifice Yitzchak, his heart was not with him.) Do not think, the Torah stresses, that if you give charity out of generosity you will be amply rewarded, but if you give only out of shame and obligation, you will receive no reward. "For in return for this matter, Hashem will bless you in all your deeds, and in everything to which your hands go out." Whether your tzedakah was a "deed" of generosity, or whether done only by your hands, you will receive Hashem's blessing.

The idea of doing, whether or not it feels right, runs contrary to the feel-good ideology of western society, in which we are lead to believe that we are capable of judging right and wrong by assessing what gives us a sense of purpose and meaning. Instead of acknowledging that as humans, our flawed feelings and biased emotions might not always guide us in the most desirable direction, modern spirituality often seems based on what gives us a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction.

Ultimately, we all dearly wish to serve Hashem with feeling and passion, not just out of obligation. "Give, you shall surely give - even one hundred times [Rashi]." The Torah is teaching us that by "training ourselves" to do the right thing, even when we lack mood and conviction, we open ourselves up to the correct feelings and ideals. What may begin as an "act of hand" will eventually become so engrained in our spirit that our hearts too will join us.

Have a good Shabbos.

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