

TITHES - KEY TO RICHES OF ALL SORTS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"And you shall rejoice with all the goodness that Hashem, your G-d, has given you and your family; you, and the Levi, and the proselyte in your midst." (26:11)

"'Goodness' can only mean the Torah, as it is written (Mishlei/Proverbs 4:2), 'For I have given you a good acquisition - My Torah - forsake it not!'

Therefore Moshe warns the Children of Israel (Devarim/Deuteronomy 14:22), 'Aser te-aser - you shall surely separate ma'aser (one tenth)!' (Midrash Rabbi Tanchuma, Re'eh 11)

The above Midrash seems to interpret the "goodness" referred to here out of context (literally it seems to refer to the fruits of one's field, the first of which the bearer has just placed before the Kohen as a first-fruit offering before Hashem), saying it means to rejoice with the Torah. True "goodness," it seems, can only mean the Torah; all other pursuits are ultimately transient and could not be called "goodness."

By concluding, "Therefore Moshe warns the Children of Israel, 'Aser te-aser - you shall surely separate a tithe," the Midrash seems to connect the concept of "rejoicing with the Torah" with the next passage, which describes the Vidui Ma'aser - Confession Over the Tithes. (The actual verse, "Aser te-aser - you shall surely separate a tithe," is not found in this week's parsha.) Yet the connection, notwithstanding the sequence of the verses, is not clear. Why, if "rejoicing with all the goodness" means the Torah, must we be especially careful to separate ma'aser, a tenth of our earnings and our fruits?

A most beautiful and brilliant explanation is quoted in the name of the holy Satmar Rebbe zt"l (see Sefer Ha-zikaron Minchas Yerushalayim, Blau, pp. 358): The Gemara (Ta'anis 9a) relates that R' Yochanan once met a small boy (it was actually his nephew, son of his sister and brother-in-law Reish Lakish) on his way home from yeshiva.

"Tell me," he asked the young lad, "which verse did your rebbe teach you today?"

"Today we learned, 'Aser te-aser, You shall surely tithe your produce!' What does it mean (i.e. why the repetitive wording)?"

Said R' Yochanan, "Aser bi-shvil she-tis'asher - Take tithes and you will surely become rich!" [This is a double entendre: Aser means to take a tithe. Osher means wealth. Thus: Give tithes, and you will become wealthy.]

"How do you know it's true?" asked the lad.

"Test it yourself!" said R' Yochanan.

"But are we allowed to test Hashem? Doesn't it state (Devarim 6:16), 'You shall not test Hashem'?"

"Yes!" R' Yochanan responded. "But my Rebbe, R' Oshaya, taught that this doesn't include ma'aser, for it is written (Malachi 3:10), 'Bring all the tithes to the treasury, and let there be sustenance in My Temple. Test me with this, please, says Hashem, if I do not open up for you the windows of the Heavens, and pour out upon you endless blessing!'"

Why, asks the Chasam Sofer, are we permitted, and even enjoined, to "test" Hashem by tithing our produce (and our earnings), if the Torah disparages and even forbids testing Hashem in all other areas?

It is natural, he answers, for man to desire wealth. While material bliss is far from our ultimate goal in life, it still remains true that, "Money makes the world go 'round," and a lack of it can make things pretty miserable for most of us. To paraphrase the holy R' Meir of Premishlan zt"l, who himself paraphrased a verse in Tehillim/Psalms (119:140), "Your Torah is tied up with money" - there are very few mitzvos for which one does not need some form of wealth; Tefillin, Lulav, Shabbos - how is one supposed to perform the Torah's 613 mitzvos without the financial means to do so? "Therefore Meir'l loves money!"

There are two mitzvos, says the Chasam Sofer, which Scripture promises will bring wealth to their performers; Torah study and tithing. We know that Torah study is perhaps the greatest of all mitzvos; it is for this mitzvah more than all others that we have been placed in this world. What a shame it would be if we were squander our precious Torah study, doing so only in the hope that it will bring us material wealth with all its trappings, instead of achieving the venerated goal of Torah Lishma - Torah study for its own sake! Yet what is one to do? We need money, and we believe that Torah study will indeed influence our bottom line - so how are we supposed to keep the aspiration of wealth from creeping into and tainting our pursuit of pure Torah?

The Torah therefore gives us another mitzvah which also guarantees material bliss - tithes. It would be ideal for us to do all mitzvos li'shma - for Hashem's sake alone. If, however, we do "taint" our mitzvos with dreams of wealth and prosperity, let us do so by giving our tithes toward this inferior (yet noble?) purpose, but let our Torah study be pure. This is why we are told, even encouraged, to test Hashem in this regard - that we should be confident in the power of tithing to achieve our material needs, so that our Torah study, at least, will be with only the purest motives.

This, he says, is the meaning of the verse immediately following Aser te- aser, You shall surely tithe, "In order that you will learn to fear Hashem, your G-d, all the days! (14:23)" That way at least our learning will be replete with fear-of-Heaven!

If, says the Satmar Rebbe, true "goodness" refers solely to the Torah, then it would obviously be

completely antithetical to study Torah in order to achieve wealth, whose goodness is at best transient, and at worst corruptive and perverse. Yet what is one to do? Even Torah study itself requires at least some form of wealth, both to purchase the necessary sefarim, and to allow one the free-time and peace-of-mind to study Torah for hours uninterrupted! Therefore, the Midrash concludes, Moshe warns the Children of Israel 'aser te-aser/you shall surely tithe' - if you are scrupulous in separating tithes from your produce and your wealth, you will never lack material needs, and you will truly be able to rejoice with the Torah as Hashem intended!

Have a good Shabbos.