

CHARITY - A LOPSIDED BARGAIN

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take a terumah (portion/separation) for Me. (25:2)

People are being asked to give a donation, so why does the Torah phrase its request as asking them to take something? And why does Hashem go out of His way to emphasize that the donation being given is "for Me?" The donations were going to be used for the construction of the Mishkan/Tabernacle, so in a sense the donations are "for Hashem" (so to speak), but we could have figured that out without Scripture stating it explicitly. Furthermore, the whole idea that by donating we are somehow "giving to Hashem" requires clarification. Does Hashem need our materials? If He so desired, could He not construct His own Mishkan without our help? By donating to such a sanctified cause, aren't we really "helping ourselves" more than we could ever, so to speak, help Hashem?

The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 30:13) takes note of the strange phraseology "let them take for Me," and comments, "[by donating towards the Mishkan] it's as if you are taking Me!" What does it mean to "take Hashem?"

In parshas Ki Savo (Devarim/Deuteronomy 26), we learn about the process of vidui ma'aser. After the third and sixth years of the seven-year agricultural cycle, a Jew had to make the following declaration before Hashem, declaring that he had been scrupulous in separating his tithes.

When you have finished tithing every tithe of your produce in the third year... then you shall say before Hashem, your G-d, "I have removed the holy things [tithes] from my house; I have also given them to the Levi, to the convert, to the orphan, and to the widow... I have done exactly as You commanded me. Now gaze down from Your holy abode, from the heavens, and bless your people Israel, and the land You have given us, just as you swore to our forefathers, a Land flowing with milk and honey."

The declaration seems to finish with a prayer, asking Hashem to bless us in the merit of our having dispersed our produce appropriately. Commenting on this request, Rashi writes, "We have done what You decreed upon us - now You do what You have to do!"

Such a request is highly unconventional. Normally, we never ask Hashem to answer our prayers in our own merit; rather, "the righteous always ask Hashem to grant their requests for nothing [i.e. despite their unworthiness] (see Rashi, beginning of parshas Va'eschanan)."

The Mizrachi asks another question: Is this person the Kohen Gadol (High Priest)? What makes him think that in the merit of his (albeit well- intended) mitzvah of dispersing tithes, he now has the right to request blessings for all Israel? Even if we allow for his right to "barter" his mitzvos with Hashem for blessings, the terms of the bargain seem extraordinarily lopsided!

We read in Mishlei/Proverbs (19:17), "One who gives graciously to the poor becomes Hashem's lender - his reward will be given him." Rabbeinu Yona in his commentary to Mishlei explains that when we give charity, Hashem considers it as if we have lent Him money (so to speak). Obviously, the loan needs to be repaid. Not only that, but Hashem rewards us for having "done Him the favour" of "lending Him the money" to support the poor. (Under normal circumstances, a "gift of appreciation" from borrower to lender might be considered a form of ribbis/interest forbidden by the Rabbanan.)

Maharshal (Nesivos Olam, Nesiv Ha-tzedakah chapter 4) explains that the concept of our "lending to Hashem" is due to the fact that every person, since he is created "against his will (i.e. we were never asked)," has a claim to the basic necessities of life. When we provide for the poor, we are in a manner of speaking satisfying Hashem's obligation to provide for every living thing, and as such, we are considered to have advanced Him the money.

The Gemara (Bava Basra 10a), in discussion of the verse, "One who gives graciously to the poor is Hashem's lender," states, "Were it not that Scripture said so, we could never make such a statement - for it is written (Mishlei 22:7), 'a borrower is the slave of his lender!'" By lending money to Hashem, to the extent we can express it, Hashem becomes beholden to us, as a slave to his master!

The Gemara (Ta'anis 9a) says that in the merit of scrupulously separating our tithes we will become wealthy, and be given limitless blessings. Sefer Ha-Chinuch (mitzvah 424) explains this concept based on the aforementioned verse, that by giving charity, we "lend Hashem." Still, repayment of a loan usually entails giving back what you were lent, no more and no less. How can we be promised limitless blessings in the merit of our very limited donations?

It is told that a yungerman from the Lakewood Yeshiva was driving along a deserted country road one Sunday morning when he was flagged down by a well dressed man standing at the side of the road next to an expensive car, which had a flat tire. It was obvious the poor fellow had no idea how to use the jack, and was elated when the young yeshiva student told him he knew how to change the tire. He quickly got the fellow's car back into shape, and was ready to continue on his way. As he approached the car's driver to bid him farewell, the man held out an envelope. "Please," he insisted, "take this as a token of my appreciation."

At first, the yeshiva bachur refused, but when he saw that the man was serious, he consented and took the envelope. The man drove off, waving to the yeshiva boy as he did. The young man got back into his car, and opened the envelope. There was a small note, expressing his appreciation for taking the time to stop and help a complete stranger, and asking him to accept his small token of

appreciation. Inside the note was a cheque, made out to "cash," for the amount of \$50,000. It was signed, "Donald Trump."

R' Dovid Krohnglass zt"l explains that this is the concept of charity: You give Hashem a small "loan," and He repays you something small. It's just that our idea of small is slightly different than Hashem's. For Him, vast wealth and countless blessings are but a "small token" of His appreciation for our putting out the money! He is beholden to us, and expresses His gratitude in ways only He can. (Based on a shiur of R' Breitowitz shlita)

It should be stressed that the fact that Hashem considers it as if we're "lending" Him the money is in itself a great kindness. Hashem, if He so desired, could easily take care of the poor without any "help" from us. He allows humans to care for one another in order to give them the opportunity to perform deeds of kindness, and be duly rewarded.

Perhaps the same can be said about Hashem's request that we build Him a Sanctuary. Although He has no need for our donations, He considers it as if we have put out the money for Him. As such, we become His lenders, and we will be repaid in a way that befits Him.

Speak to the Children of Israel, let them take a terumah for Me - I will consider it, says Hashem, as if what they're giving is for Me, i.e. for something I need. If so, by giving we're actually taking, because when we compare our ability to give with Hashem's concept of repayment, we realize we've struck a bargain absurdly lopsided in our favour. It is perhaps in this sense that the Midrash exclaims that by donating towards the Mishkan, Hashem says, "It's as if you're taking Me!" because Hashem becomes indebted to us, as it were, as a slave to His master.

The next time you happen to come across Donald Trump stranded at the side of the road, it may be worth your while to stop and give him a hand. In case you don't, it's good to know that by giving generously to worthy causes we become partners with Hashem, and in so doing, we stand to be repaid in ways we may never had dreamed.

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