

GIVE IT UP

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Many years ago, as the result of a tragic fire that destroyed many of the houses, businesses and public buildings in his city, the Rav ha-iyer (Rabbi of the city) was reduced to being a fundraiser - wandering from town to village soliciting funds to help his brethren rebuild their homes, and their lives.

Most of the people he met were touched by the story he told, and gave generously according to their means. Without delay, he would dispatch whatever money he raised back to the elders of the city, who were overseeing the rescue and recovery effort.

The Rav's pleas were so convincing that he managed to convince even the most miserly of Jews to participate - at least until the day he entered Reb Matis's jewelry store. If the lavishly furnished shop and top-notch jewelry was any indication, Reb Matis - whose name graced the ornate sign that hung outside - was a man of means. The Rav hoped he could secure a generous donation, but it soon became apparent that that was easier said than done.

Reb Matis interrupted the Rav's carefully prepared appeal. "Ha-Rav, with all due respect, don't waste your time. I try my best to do mitzvos, but I'm not in the habit of distributing my hard-earned parnassah to others. I was also a pauper, and I worked like crazy to build up this store. I'm sorry for your townsfolk, and sincerely wish them the best in rebuilding their lives - which I think they can do without my largesse if they try hard enough - but I refuse to act as a crutch for the unfortunate, which teaches them to rely on others rather than resorting to their own ingenuity."

"That's ridiculous," the Rav said. "We're not talking about beggars who won't take a job. These peoples' lives were destroyed - their homes and businesses burned to the ground - how can you be so heartless as to not help them get back on their feet."

"Oh but I am helping them," Reb Matis responded coldly. "I'm teaching them one of life's most valuable lessons: Do for yourself, and rely on no one." "That's very 'noble' of you," the Rav said. "Still, according to the Torah there's a mitzvah to perform deeds of kindness with others. Since I obviously will not coax you into being kind, I will instead turn the tables and do with you a deed of kindness."

"What exactly do mean," Reb Matis wondered. "I'm not in need of your philanthropy."

"Oh but you are," the Rav said. "You are very sick, and by visiting you I am performing the mitzvah of bikur cholim (visiting the infirm)." "I assure you, HaRav, that I'm as healthy as I am wealthy."

"Do you then deny the prophecy of Shlomo Ha-Melech (King Solomon), the wisest of all men, who said, 'There is a terrible sickness I have seen beneath the sun: when a man's wealth is preserved to his detriment.' (Koheles/Ecclesiastes 5:12)? You have been granted great wealth, and yet you arrogantly refuse to share it with those less fortunate? I have no doubt whatsoever that your wealth will ultimately be your downfall - if not in this world then in the next, when you will be forced to stand judgment on your heartless apathy."

"That's cute," Reb Matis said. "But if the Rav was looking to do the mitzvah of bikur cholim in earnest, I suspect he would have better spent his time visiting the hospitals, where the truly sick lie, waiting for someone to come and pay attention to them, rather than visiting me and trying to heal me with his poorly-argued rebuke."

"You're right," the Rav said, "but I have a hidden reason why I chose to come here and do the mitzvah of bikur cholim specifically with you. However, I won't tell you it unless you promise to give me at least a small donation for my cause."

Matis's curiosity was piqued. "Ok, you've got me - tell me why."

"Chazal, our Sages, commenting on parshas Vayechi, say that when Yosef first came to visit his father, Yaakov, he was deathly sick. Once Yosef entered the room, however, he felt an immediate improvement in his condition, and was able to sit up, as it says (48:2), 'And Yisrael (Yaakov) was strengthened, and he sat up on the bed.' One who visits the sick, the Sages teach, removes one-sixtieth of his sickness - this is why he suddenly felt stronger. The concept is in fact alluded to in this very verse: The numerical value of the bed (Hebrew: ha-mitah) is 59 - to teach us that after Yosef's visit, Yaakov was left with only 59/60th of his illness. So of course I'd much rather visit you - and have the pleasure of removing 1/60th of your 'sickness.'" (Ma'aseh Shoshan)

The Midrash (Pesikta Rabati 25) says that during the times of the Beis Ha- Mikdash (Holy Temple), there was a man named Navot who had a very beautiful voice. On Yamim Tovim, when everyone gathered in Jerusalem, thousands would gather to hear his prayers. One year, Navot decided he couldn't be bothered to come, despite the disappointment of his admirers. Shortly afterwards he was killed and his land confiscated (see Melachim/Kings I 21). Paradoxically, had Navot ascended to Jerusalem and fulfilled the mitzvah of pilgrimage, the Midrash says his land would not have been taken, because the Torah promises (Shemos/Exodus 34:24), "No man shall covet your land when you go up to appear before Hashem, your G-d, three times a year."

Mefarshim explain that Navot's error was that he thought his melodious voice was his gift - to use or forsake as he pleased - when in fact it's 'on loan' from Hashem to use in ways that increase His honor and bring pleasure and joy to others. Since he misappropriated his 'property,' he had his property taken away from him.

The concept of wealth preserved to its owner to his detriment doesn't only apply to money. Everyone has gifts. A nice voice; a good head; sensitivity; a good cook; organized; physical strength;

tirelessness; unflappability; joy... We may not think much of our gifts, and perhaps we shouldn't let them get to our heads, but if we allow 'humility' to prevent us from using our gifts - many or few they may be - to enrich others' lives, we will be held accountable, on this world or the next.

The word matana, gift, is from the root nasan -- to give. Nasan, both in Hebrew and English, is a palindrome - perhaps hinting that what we're given must be given back. Have a good Shabbos. Text Copyright © 2009 by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann and **Torah.org**