

THE PERFECT GIVER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God spoke to Moshe, saying, "Tell the Children of Israel to take an elevated-offering for Me ..." (Shemos 25:1-2)

Let us talk about gifts. Though the word 'terumah' used in this week's parshah literally means 'elevated offering,' it is also used to mean a 'gift', specifically with respect to contributions made to organizations that depend upon the generosity of others to further the cause of Torah and the Jewish people. When you give such a gift to such an organization, it is considered to be giving a gift to God, just like in this week's parshah.

Not that God needs our gifts, of course, especially since, as Rashi alludes on the above verse, that everything belongs to God in the first place. Rather, as Rashi explains, what we're supposed to do is give the gift for the sake of God, to benefit Him, so-to-speak, and not ourselves. Or, perhaps more accurately, we're supposed to give the gift on behalf of God.

To appreciate this idea, it is worthwhile to review what might be intellectually obvious to many people, but not so emotionally obvious. Warning, though: when we're finished, giving to charitable organizations might be easier than you had hoped.

As God says, all the money belongs to Him, even after we work for it. However, man was created with free-will in order to be able to make moral choices and earn his portion in the World-to-Come. Therefore, God created a world in which people can possess things to such an extent that they can believe what they have is theirs.

As we are taught by the Talmud, every year on Rosh Hashanah it is decided who gets what and how much. The only question that remains after the Ten Days of Repentance is how they will get their allotted portion, easily or with difficulty, in a timely fashion, or in an untimely manner. Who needs money when you already have enough of it, and what is good is future or past money if you need it right now?

That is with respect to what is coming to us. However, with respect to what is due to others, another question is, what role will we play in that process? God can decide that a person is meant to receive \$1,000 on January 23, let's say, but it will be up to other people who will have the merit to act as God's messenger to deliver that money, earning reward in the World-to-Come for doing so.

That is what we are responsible to do. We're all born into different situations, with different pluses

and minuses. But, the bottom line at the end of the day will be how good a person we became given the context into which we were born. And this is something only God will be able to evaluate since only He knows what obstacles a person had to overcome along his personal journey.

So, when God decides to give some money to a person, He looks around and asks, "Who will be a good messenger for this task?" Or, likewise, if He wishes to take money away from a person, He asks, "Who is able to divest this person of his money and possessions?"

At that time, our resumes pass before God, so-to-speak. Generous people are called upon to be generous to those worthy of Divine assistance, allowing them to increase their own standing in the World-to-Come. Stingy people, or dishonest people, are called upon to take another's money away, causing them to reduce their portion in the World-to-Come. This is how we are made to actualize the good or evil we adopt into our lives, and to face the consequences of doing so.

Or, an event, such as lottery, may quickly enrich someone, while a car accident, God forbid, or something of the sort, might occur to reduce a person's financial worth. As random as all of it may seem on the outside, it is all designated On High on the inside, meaning that all of it is the result of Hashgochah Pratis—Divine Providence. The person who 'just happened' to win 300 million dollars in the State lottery, because he 'just happened' to buy a ticket in a store that he 'just happened' to be buying milk at, was meant to win that money.

It may also look random because there are some very wealthy people out there who we may think deserve only a fraction of what they own, or we may see poor people who really deserve a much higher level of living. Though we may not always want justice with respect to our own lives, we somehow expect it with respect to everyone else's lives. And, if some people don't see it, they think that God is sleeping at the wheel, or worse.

However, Divine justice takes into account more than just the past and the future of a single lifetime. It can also take into account many incarnations, and as the Zohar and the Arizal revealed, justice can span many lifetimes. That means that we can pay for mistakes of past lives in present lives, or reap the benefits of moral behavior from previous gilgulim in our present gilgul. It can get that complicated.

But the bottom line of all of this is that no matter how hard we work and how entitled we feel, everything we have belongs to God. We are His tellers, so-to-speak, responsible for moving His money around to whomever He wishes to give it to, when He wishes to do so. The only question is, will we be good tellers or bad tellers, receiving reward for the former and the opposite for the latter.

Of course, we have to eat and function to be able to play that role. So, as the Talmud says, God gives us a stipend, whatever it is we personally need to be able to our job and fulfill our role on earth. Tzaddikim, who know all of this intellectually and emotionally, make a point, therefore, of minimalizing what they personally take from this world, to make sure that they do not take more than they have coming to them. To do so, they believe, is a form of stealing, something that will have

to be paid back at some point in time.

It's quite a level to live on. However, the rest of us may look at things differently. We may not steal, but what we earn we feel is rightfully ours, and therefore, ours to decide what to do with. When people come to my door collecting tzeddakah and I am generous, I feel that it is my money that I am being generous with, not God's.

Wrong.

Not only that, but this computer I am working on right now, is God's too. And, so is everything else I am benefiting from, as is the case with my neighbor, and everyone else in the world. And all of it exists only to allow us to serve God in one way or another, either by being used directly for a mitzvah, like furniture that is used for guests, or indirectly, by allowing me to live a decent life in order to have the energy to perform mitzvos.

And, if I don't, will I lose it? Possibly. But for the sake of free-will, punishment is not always so direct or swift. Sometimes God will leave wealth He gave to a person to use for a mitzvah in his possession, even if he does not use it for a mitzvah. But, while the person may think that he is the rightful owner of the thing, evident by the way he uses it at will, in reality, Heaven is keeping track of how he is benefiting from someone else's property—Heaven's property.

As a result, somewhere along the line, there will be a price to pay. It might be actual currency, extracted by God in some way or another. It might be taken in another way that the person feels more strongly about. Or, it might just go on his tab for the final day of judgment, when the accounting angel pulls out his laptop and goes over all unwarranted personal pleasures, which we will pay for either with merits from the World-to-Come, or time in Giheon.

It's a little like making brochos over food. Do we make a brochah so we can eat (otherwise it is like stealing from God), or do we eat so we can make a brochah? Intellectually, it is the latter, but emotionally, it tends to be the former. The average person does not live to make blessings, so therefore, he does not spend time looking to make them. He just says them when the halachah tells him to.

But, there are people out there who love to make brochos. Every opportunity that is supported by halachah to do so, they seek out and use. When they reach for an apple, even if they are hungry, they are most excited by the opportunity to bless God for the apple, or whatever they are about to eat and enjoy. While some people get excited by the opportunity to make more money, they get excited by the opportunity to make more brochos (especially since everyone is supposed to say 100 each day).

This is the way, ideally, we are supposed to look at our possessions and all that we earn. What we need to sustain ourselves on whatever level necessary to serve God is considered, by the Talmud, a stipend. What we keep for ourselves after that has to be justifiable to Heaven, or it goes on our tab,

to be paid for later, down to the last dime. The IRS has nothing on Heaven's accountants.

The rest is meant to put us in a position to act as vehicles to move money and possessions to people or places designated by God. Sometimes, we may seek them out because we are looking to be charitable, sometimes they come to us either as an individual in need, or an organization that is looking for financial support. It might be a friend or some one else in need of a loan to start a business, or some other meaningful kind of venture.

Then God makes the shidduch, by matching donor and recipient. No matter how distant I may feel from the person who has approached me, if God didn't want him to cross my path he be there, and once he is, there is a reason for it. Now the question becomes, "Does God want me to give to this person on His behalf, and if yes, how much?"

That may be the toughest question of all. For most people, it might result in giving too little. For a few others, it might result in giving too much. But not with respect to the recipient, for my decision cannot give more to a person than God planned to give to him, or less for that matter. The only thing my decision can affect will be whether or not I am the complete vehicle to do God's bidding for this person, or not.

However, if a person takes these ideas to heart, and then fills his heart with a desire to do all that God wishes, he'll know, somehow, what to give. And knowing that will not only allow the person to be a perfect shaliach for God and His Divine banking system, it will also determine how much the giver himself is meant to get.

Text

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