

# ELEVATING A GIFT

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

**IT WAS THE FIRST** Shul Fund. The Jewish people had lived in Egypt as paupers and were enriched by the Egyptians just before they left. They further added to their wealth at the crossing of the sea when the possessions of the drowned Egyptians washed up on their side of the shore. Now they were being asked to contribute to the building of the Mishkan, the portable Temple.

It was the beginning of a tradition that lives until this very day. We are constantly building new shuls, yeshivos, and other community projects, and turning to the community to fund them. Where I live, a shul was recently built after collecting for about 20 years.

In recent times, a lot of the financial burden has been shifted to specific community members who have been blessed with financial abundance. It's not uncommon these days for a single "gvir" to pick up the tab for an entire building, or a least most of it. It is certainly a great merit for them and their families.

From the community's perspective, it is more a matter of HOW MUCH you give than HOW you give it. Goodwill is also necessary when building anything in life, but it does not pay the bills. It is the Building Committee's job to make sure that all bills are paid so that the project can be completed respectfully. Goodwill only helps with that when it comes attached to a large check.

From God's perspective of course, it is the other around. How you give, what you do, is always more important to God than how much you give. As the Zohar says, everything in this world comes down to a person's will, and self-sacrifice is the currency of the World-to-Come. God can always fund whatever He wants anyway He wants. He can't however make a person want to do something he does not want to do.

Can't? There is something God CAN'T do? Yes, but only because He doesn't WANT to do it. God can make a person want to do the right thing if He wants to. He can put it in the person's heart to do the moral thing. The only problem is that it would defy the whole purpose of Creation, and render the person's act meaningless to God.

Sometimes God makes a person do the right thing anyhow, but for a reason. It could be that it has to be done for the benefit of another who deserves it, in which case the recipient benefits but the benefactor will not. Or, it could be for the benefit of the person himself, as a kind of reward for having willingly put himself out for truth in the past.

In general though, when it comes to doing the right thing, it is something God wants man to choose. God may help with the circumstances, but at the end of the day, the choice to be moral has to be the person's. This is so that he can be rewarded for his choice in Olam HaBa—the World-to-Come.

This lesson is taught to us at the beginning of this week's parsha. The verse says:

God spoke to Moshe saying, "Speak to the Children of Israel, and have them take for Me an offering; from every person whose heart inspires him to generosity, you shall take My offering." (Shemos 25:1-2)

Have them take for Me: dedicated to My Name. (Rashi)

On the surface of it, the Jewish people were being asked for money. But, what kind of a request was it? Clearly God had made them wealthy, and now He was asking them to give a little back for a great purpose. As Iyov said, "God gives and God takes," and better we should give it before He takes it due to our lack of appreciation.

It's like a father who wants his son to contribute to the cost of raising him, only to give him an allowance so that he can pay something. In a sense, he is just giving back to the father what was the father's in the first place.

Unless that is, it is not money that the father really wants from his son. If the father wanted his son to share the concern of the family's welfare, then the father's money just becomes the vehicle to include his son's sense of concern. It was a way to reach his son's heart through his son's pocket.

Thus in the end, God wasn't asking for money, which, anyhow, belongs to Him even when it is still in our wallets. He was asking for something He didn't have before, and which only WE could provide: our hearts. The contribution He requested from us was only meant to be the means to show how much we care about what is important to Him.

Someone recently told me a story that is relevant to this discussion. Over the course of many years, he has received many contributions, small and large. But only once did a person send him something so small that he thought at first it was a mistake. After the processing fee, he was left with even less.

Then he read the note. It was short and to the point.

Dear Rabbi. I really enjoy your work and appreciate your efforts. I wish I could help you a lot more. This is all I can afford at this time. Maybe in the future.

He cannot take this note to the bank and use it to pay down his overdraft. He cannot show it to the phone company and pay off his monthly bill. His local supermarket certainly will not accept it in payment of what he owes. For that, he will have to rely upon his wealthier supporters.

Nevertheless he told me, there is tremendous worth in the note and contribution. Of the many gifts

he has received over the years, that one was not about the money. It was about the will, the want, the desire to express a lot of appreciation through a little bit of money.

When it comes to people, we don't necessarily care about the intention behind the gift or payment. The main thing is that we received it, and can use it to get by another day. The important thing for many is that, at the end of the day, their quality of life will have improved.

Unless, of course, the relationship is a relationship type of relationship. Try telling your spouse, "Does it really make a difference if I put some thought into this gift? The main thing is that I gave you something!"

If that is true, then the relationship is not much of a relationship. It is more like a business partnership that, tragically, often results in one spouse "suing for divorce." Amount or size of gift only really matters in relationship relationships when it clearly indicates a level of care as well.

It's not ONLY the thought that counts when it comes to gifts, but neither is it ONLY the gift. Both have to be the reason for each other. That is what elevates a gift and makes it into a "terumah," a true "elevated offering."