

# DIVINE HANDOUTS

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

Does knowing the reason for a specific mitzvah motivate the performance of that mitzvah? I would think that it depends on the mitzvah. Tzedaka, for example, is greatly affected by reason.

1. If we accept that G-d administers His world by giving some people more and some people less, with the intent of the more sharing with the less, then giving 10% of our income to Tzedaka is much easier. "I am not giving away what is mine, I am giving away that which G-d entrusted to me to give to others."
2. If we further understand that G-d organized His world in this manner so that humans would have the chance to emulate His ways and thereby become closer to Him by being more like Him, then the mitzvah is even more enticing.
3. If we grasp that the essence of our existence is to be as close to G-d as humanly possible, and emulating G-d by doing acts of Chesed is the truest way of doing so, then the mitzvah of Tzedaka becomes among the simplest ways to justify our place and purpose in the universe.

However, the truth is that most of us give Tzedaka because we are emotionally moved to do so. Imagine if we lived in a community where no one was poor, the Yeshivas had no deficits, our addresses and phone numbers weren't listed, and our homes were not on the Mishulachim circuit. Would we still give Tzedaka? And if yes, would we give nearly as much as we often feel compelled to do? Personally, I do not think so.

If it is true that reasons alone do not motivate us to perform Mitzvos- even those like charity that are "humanistic and obvious" - then we will certainly not feel compelled to do those Mitzvos that are purely religious or ceremonial and do not provide an obvious social benefit. For example, the mitzvah of Shatnez. "Do not wear wool and linen together in a single garment" (22:11) How many of us, men and women, are careful to have our garments tested for Shatnez? From a purely legal point of view, wearing Shatnez is as serious a transgression as eating non-kosher! Yet, many self-proclaimed religionist who would never consider eating anything but kosher, have never had their clothing checked for Shatnez!

All Mitzvos, besides their obvious or less than obvious logic, have a symbolic value. Tzedaka, besides providing for the needy, symbolically represents the manner in which G-d relates to all of us. "Just as He is merciful, so too must you be merciful". Therefore, giving Tzedaka is not just a way

to be compassionate and caring for the needy and less fortunate. It teaches us that, "there but for the grace of G-d go I." What we each have and claim as our own is as much a divine handout to us as the coin we deposit in a tin cup is to a blind man.

History has shown time and time again that human nature is oriented toward symbols. Symbols express our deepest felt convictions and beliefs and give form and substance to our most profound emotions. Therefore, understanding the symbolic value of a Mitzvah can often be a powerful motivator.

I would like to offer a possible explanation for the mitzvah of Shatnez, and maybe, just maybe, motivate a greater performance of its demands.

Wool and linen each symbolize an attitudinal approach toward G-d that are equally valid, yet potentially opposing or contradictory. It suggests that the two attitudes must be seen as apart from each other, and that the contrast between the two can teach us how we should relate to G-d. As part of Moshe's farewell discourse to the Jewish people, Moshe forewarned the nation to always be cognizant of their absolute dependency upon G-d. While in the desert, their dependency upon G-d was self-evident. Their food, water, and protection were clearly, "divine handouts." However, once they entered into Eretz Yisroel, their sustenance would be "as all the other nations".

To the discerning eye, nature is as much a revelation of G-d's mastery as was Manna. Therefore, as Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explained, G-d commanded us to say a blessing specifically after eating bread because bread symbolizes man's ingenuity and innovation over nature. By saying Birkat Hamazon (Grace After Meals) we remind ourselves that "man does not live by bread alone." We survive and prosper because of a direct, although covert, divine handout. Regardless of our individual initiative, ingenuity, and participation, our successes are an expression of G-d's benevolence toward us, and our dependency upon Him.

I would like to suggest that the mitzvah of Shatnez symbolizes the struggle we each have in accepting G-d's absolute mastery over our lives, and our complete dependency. Wool represents G-d's overt presence in all our endeavors and our dependency upon Him. Linen represents our tendency to take personal credit for our successes while denying or limiting G-d's primary involvement and responsibility.

In the story of Kayin (Cain) and Hevel (Able), the Torah emphasized their individual occupations. Kayin was a farmer and Hevel was a shepherd. The mere mention of their occupations suggests that we are being offered an insight into the workings of the human mind and heart. Hevel (futility - nothingness) as his name implies, recognized the physical world as a means toward the greater end of serving G-d. In and of itself, the universe has no value or relevance. Only in relation to recognizing and serving the Creator does the physical world attain significance.

It was clear to Hevel that all success and accomplishment must be attributed directly to G-d and not to self. Therefore, Hevel chose to be a shepherd. A shepherd is a caretaker. He oversees his flock

protecting them from predators and leading them to green pastures. The extent of his success depends upon the strength and growth of the flock. If the sheep are fertile the shepherd's wealth increases. His success or failure depends almost entirely on the workings of nature and the not so covert hand of G-d. If there is plentiful pasture the flocks will be properly nurtured, if not they starve. As such, the shepherd's work is a constant reinforcement of his dependency upon G-d and His benevolence.

On the other hand, Kayin, whose name implied a partnership between Chava and G-d in Kayin's birth, ("I have gained a man with G-d". Ber.4:1) chose to be a farmer. A farmer appears to wage a daily battle with the forces of nature in order to prepare, plant, cultivate, and harvest his crops. His successes, although equally as dependent as the shepherd upon the not so covert hand of G-d, provide him with the rational for taking personal credit for the successes. His efforts and hard work make him minimally a partner with G-d in the outcome. As such, the farmer's work constantly challenges the acceptance of his total dependency upon G-d and His benevolence. Therefore, Kayin, who as his name implied, struggled with the issue of his dependency upon G-d, chose farming as his occupation.

In truth, we are supposed to rise to the challenge and see G-d's mastery in all of our endeavors. Therefore, upon entering Eretz Yisroel, the Jewish people were destined to become farmers. The farmer who attributes all his successes to G-d's benevolence is far stronger in his acceptance of his dependency upon G-d than the shepherd who has avoided the challenge by virtue of his occupation. In order to make it easier for the Jews to overcome Kayin's fatal flaw, G-d commanded us many Mitzvos that are directed toward farming and agriculture. These Mitzvos, (eg. Shmitah, Yovel, Trumah, Maaser, Bikurim, Kilayim, Likcha, Shikcha, Payah, etc.) provide a constant reminder of our absolute dependency upon G-d, regardless of our hard work and effort.

The contrast between Kayin the farmer, and Hevel the shepherd, highlights our constant struggle in accepting the degree of our dependency upon G-d. (Remember: If I accept the totality of my dependency I should feel obligated to follow G-d's laws. By denying the dependency I avoid the sense of obligation.) Wool comes from sheep and linen from flax. Wool represents Hevel the shepherd, and linen represents Kayin the farmer. By commanding us to not wear Shatnez, a mixture of wool and linen, G-d reminds us of the constant struggle that we each have in accepting our dependency upon Him and following His Torah.

Good Shabbos.

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