

INTENTION EQUALS VALUE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The ability to part with one's wealth and possessions for a philanthropic purpose is not easily attained and is also not easily maintained when attained. The "normal" attitude towards wealth and possessions is characterized by the great rabbis of the Book of Avot as being: "What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours." The desire to have more wealth and possessions is so intense that the Talmud sadly comments, "Most people are guilty of stealing from others." Since the drive to have more material wealth and keep and conserve what is mine is apparently so ingrained in our human nature, the Torah goes to great lengths to uproot that characteristic - selfishness and miserliness - from our nature and to turn us in the direction of selflessness and generosity. The Torah therefore made the construction of the Mishkan, the tabernacle in the desert, a human project rather than a Godly one.

The Jewish people were requested to donate substantial contributions of materials from their own personal wealth in order to complete that structure. After centuries of slavery in Egypt, and after suffering impoverishment and want, it would be only natural to expect that there would be a hesitance among the newly freed slaves to part with their only- recently-acquired goods and possessions. The Torah boldly moves to counter that weakness of character and demands immediately that the generation that only just left Egyptian poverty and bondage become a nation of sharing and philanthropy. The Torah however does not measure donations and giving by purely objective standards. It is not merely the amount that is being given, important as that figure is, that ultimately counts. It is also - and perhaps even more important in a spiritual and psychological sense than the amount of the gift - the spirit and intent of the giver that determines the true value of the gift and donation.

The Torah records that the contributions for the Mishkan were to be taken "from every person whose heart prompted him to donate" to the holy project. And that, my friends, is a very subjective standard, known perhaps only to the Creator of us all. When we donate money, time, talent, effort to a good cause, there are usually a wide variety of forces and influences that motivate us to do so. If we can examine our motives and impulses to give to charitable causes and "improve" on those motives - to raise them to a more selfless and less complicated level of our being, the gifts that we give will have a far deeper meaning and effect upon our inner character, even if the amount of the gifts basically remains constant.

The great Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, the founder of the "mother" of all later Lithuanian yeshivot, the

yeshiva of Volozhin, employed fund-raisers to travel in Eastern Europe to collect donations for the support of the yeshiva. A wealthy donor to the yeshiva once complained to Rabbi Chaim that he wanted his donation to go directly to the study of Torah and not be consumed in the expenses of the fund-raising projects and employees. Rabbi Chaim coolly answered him: "When Jews contributed gold to the building of the Mishkan all of them undoubtedly wished that their particular piece of gold be used in the creation of the Holy Ark itself and not dispensed for other purposes connected with the expenses of that construction. Bezalel, the builder of the Mishkan, possessed Divine inspiration and was able to discern which gold was given with the purest and most selfless of motives and which gold was donated because of other causes and influences.

The "pure" gold, given selflessly, without hesitation and in fulfillment of God's commandment, found its way into the construction of the Holy Ark, which housed the tablets of stone of Sinai. The other gold, containing the dross of conflicting and varying motives, was used for the other tasks necessary for the creation of the Mishkan. So too is the matter regarding the donations to the yeshiva of Volozhin. The purer the intent of the donor to only do God's will and to truly support the study of His Torah, the more likely it is that his donation will be used directly for the study of Torah itself and not be subsumed in the expenses of the fund-raising operations of the yeshiva. So, it is the donor himself, not I nor my staff, that will make the eventual determination as to how and where the monies donated will be allocated and spent."

Shabat Shalom.
Rabbi Berel Wein

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