

USE YOUR GIVING MUSCLES

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Giving away some of one's material wealth is never an easy thing. Our instinct tells us that what is mine, earned through my efforts, should always remain mine and in my possession. In the phrase of the rabbis, we have "a jaundiced eye" towards others and we resent their imposing themselves upon us for continued help and financial donations. We do not even think ourselves to be selfish for thinking and behaving in this fashion.

After all there is a rabbinic opinion in Avot that states that what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours and that this viewpoint is a balanced and median one. Yet there is another opinion expressed in that very same mishna in Avot that declares such an attitude regarding one's possessions to be the trait of the wicked people from the locality of Sodom. This is in line with the Torah's early description of human nature as "being evil from its earliest youth."

The Torah recognizes human nature for what it is. Man is born as a wild donkey, selfish, screaming, kicking and grasping. The Torah came to adjust human nature to seek higher goals and greater moral and social stature. We cannot completely alter human nature. But we can refine it and direct it towards noble goals and higher purposes.

The Torah recognizes that what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours and yet it points out that this seemingly logical balanced view eventually leads down the slippery slope of Sodomite behavior. One must therefore train one's self in the art of giving and donating one's wealth to others, be they individuals in need or worthy institutions and causes such as the Mishkan/tabernacle.

I unfortunately recently spent over a month confined to a sickbed until the infection that I had came under control and I was able to start walking again. The problem was that during that month of complete physical inactivity my back and leg muscles atrophied, so that even though I wished to walk upright and normally again I could not do so without great pain and difficulty. Eventually, I slowly returned to my normal health and my muscles again became reacquainted with bearing my not inconsiderable bulk.

This physical rule applies to charitable giving as well. One who does not give charity regularly will find that the generous hand muscles that sign the check and open the wallet have atrophied so that even when one wishes to give, it is painful and sometimes even impossible to do so. Therefore the Torah places great emphasis in this week's parsha upon the ability to give freely and voluntarily to the great cause - the holy Mishkan/Tabernacle.

It almost becomes the primary commandment in the Torah, in terms of the attention devoted to it in the holy text itself. This is because most of the other commandments of the Torah require discipline and control, not to give into our base natures, but here the Torah demands that we completely overcome our natural state of what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours.

Here we are required not to merely channel or control our nature but rather to change it completely. And that requires constant effort, training and habitual behavior.

Shabat shalom.

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com