

RESTORING DIGNITY

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"...you shall not send him empty-handed; you shall adorn him with gifts..."(15:13,14)

After six years of servitude, the Torah requires that the Jewish slave be set free. Additionally, he should not go out empty-handed. Rather, his master should furnish him with gifts of significant value. What is the rationale behind obligating a person to give a gift? Clearly, this is not his compensation, for the Torah requires that the slave be paid in full up front.

When Avraham returned from Egypt, the Torah records that he went "according to his travels".¹ Chazal teach that Avraham retraced the path which he had taken during his descent to Egypt, so that he would be able to lodge at the same inns where he stayed on his way down.² What is the notion of a person returning to an establishment which he has previously patronized?

If we analyze the modern-day concept of tipping, we can gain some insight to assist in answering the aforementioned questions. Why is it the accepted practice to tip for certain services, while for others it is not? For example, if a person checks in his luggage curbside, he leaves a tip with the porter. However, if he checks his luggage in at the counter, he does not tip the attendant. Similarly, one tips a barber, but not a cashier. The reason is as follows: When someone does a personal service for us, to a certain extent, he has been demeaned. It is for personal service, therefore, that we tip. The tip is the means by which we restore dignity to the person serving us; it shows our appreciation for what he has done for us.

An innkeeper offers round-the-clock personal service to his guests. Avraham Avinu is teaching us that the most effective way to restore the innkeeper's dignity is to continue to patronize his establishment. This is the ultimate show of appreciation. The Torah requires that we give parting gifts to the Jewish slave, since, for six years he has been at our beck and call, giving us the highest level of personal service that one Jew can give another. We are obligated, therefore, to restore his dignity.

It is now apparent why the Torah uses what appears to be a very difficult verb for the giving of a gift. Instead of the more common verb used for giving, "titein", the Torah uses "ha'aneik", which is not found anywhere else in the Torah in that form. Rashi explains that the word comes from the noun "anaka", which means jewelry worn around the neck. When a person wears jewelry, he feels elevated. It gives him a sense of dignity. This is the function of the gift which is given to the Jewish slave. We are attempting to restore the dignity that was lost by his six years of personal service.

1.Bereishis 13:3 2.Arachin 16b

Penniless From Heaven

"for destitute people will not cease from the midst of the land" (15:11)

The Ramban cites the opinion of the Ibn Ezra which says that the curse of poverty will always remain with Bnei Yisroel, for they will never completely rid themselves of sin. The Ramban takes issue with this interpretation, arguing that the Torah would never offer a prophesy which suggests that Bnei Yisroel will never completely adhere to the precepts of the Torah. Rather, the Ramban postulates, the Torah is stating that there may be future generations who will be stricken with poverty, but not that it is a fait accompli that all future generations of Bnei Yisroel will be doomed to contend with destitution.¹ Other commentaries concur with the Ibn Ezra, such as the Rashbam who cites the verse in Koheles "ein tzaddik ba'aretz..." - "there exists no righteous man who accomplishes only good and does not sin".² According to these commentaries, it appears that poverty is a necessary component in the infrastructure of a society. This notion is also corroborated with the Talmudic interpretation of the verse which states that poverty will exist even in Messianic times.³ Why did Hashem create a system which cannot rid itself of poverty?

The performance of acts of kindness accomplishes two distinctly different objectives. The universally accepted notion of performing altruistic acts stems from our societal obligation to ensure that the basic needs of each individual are met. Our sense of connection to each and every human being arouses our compassion to make the needs and anguish of others our own. The word "kindness" itself reflects this social consciousness, stemming from the word "kindred" - "of our kind".

However, there is another dimension to the performance of acts of kindness. The very fact that an omnipotent G-d who has no deficiencies or needs created a world in which man can live, teaches us that creation itself is the ultimate act of benevolence. Hashem wishes to make man the beneficiary of His kindness; this is the meaning of the verse "olam chesed yibaneh" - "the world is built through kindness". Kindness is therefore the ultimate manner in which Hashem revealed and continues to reveal Himself to the world.

Emulation is the most effective manner by which we identify and connect to one another. The premise of the advertising techniques on Madison Avenue is based upon the creation of an image to which people will want to connect and emulate; by wearing the clothes or using the products which a famous film star or sports figure endorse, people feel a closer connection to them. Consequently, we can connect to Hashem by emulating Him, and the best manner in which to do so is through the performance of acts of kindness. Therefore, aside from the kindred spirit we share with our fellow man, we also connect and identify ourselves with Hashem through acts of kindness.

Poverty is a necessity in every society, for the act of giving is what elevates a person to become a holy being. Without poverty, we would not be able to express the G-dliness that we have within ourselves.

1.Ramban 15:11, Ibn Ezra 15:6 2.Rashbam 15:11, Koheles 20:7 3.Shabbos 151b
