

Parashat Ki Tissa: The Experience of Giving



Dear Friends,

On the table around me is a great assortment of Mishlochei Manot which I received on Thursday, Purim day. I am full of admiration for the creativity, effort, and enthusiasm that these gifts reflect. They do not seem to be the result of social obligation at all! Quite the contrary. Judging by the taste, it is as if Purim couldn't come fast enough, and with it the opportunity to give.

It seems we all want to give! There is a desire deep within us to give, and we constantly seek meaningful opportunities to do so.

We learn from this week's parasha that giving - whether material or spiritual - heals the soul.

Two great opportunities for giving are described in the coming chapters - one in the current parasha, Ki Tissa, and one in the next parasha, Vayakhel. They are very different from one another, but they share a commonality which moves me to tears.

Before we delve into these two instances, the opening verses of our parasha lay out the deeper significance of giving:

“When you [Moshe] take a census of the Israelite people according to their enrollment, each shall pay the LORD a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague may come upon them through their being enrolled. This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall pay: a half-shekel by the sanctuary weight... as an offering to the LORD. ... the rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel when giving the LORD's offering as expiation for your persons. You shall take the expiation money from the Israelites and assign it to the service of the Tent of Meeting; it shall serve the Israelites as a reminder before the LORD...”

(Shmot 30: 13-16)

The act of giving described here is unlike any other! This is because it combines two mechanisms - census-taking, and expiation, or atonement. It is absolutely forbidden to count human beings. Anyone who has seen a Holocaust survivor with a number tattooed onto his arm understands why. People are not objects. Each person is an entire world, and cannot be numbered. Instead, each person is acknowledged by the half-shekel they give. By giving the half shekel, he or she is declaring “Hineni”, here I am. But the act is even greater, because an additional process happens when the money is given: the giver achieves atonement for his or her soul. It is usually understood as atonement for being counted in a census. I will offer another understanding later.

And now, for the two instances of giving:

The first occurs in this week's parasha. 39 days have passed since Moshe went up to Mount Sinai, into the mist in which God is present. And then everything goes wrong...:

“When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who shall

go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.” Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron.” (Shmot 32: 1-3)

According to our Sages, Aharon was sure that Bnei Yisrael would NOT agree to give him their gold, thus thwarting the danger ahead, or at least buying him some time. But he was so wrong. They gave gladly!

Lest we think that the generosity they displayed was motivated by their desire for a golden idol, Parashat Vayakhel proves that it did not. After Moshe’s anger at the events of the Golden Calf subsides, and after he returns from another 40-day period on Mount Sinai with the second set of Tablets in his arms, he tells the People about the commandment to build a Tabernacle for God. He tells them:

“This is what the LORD has commanded: Take from among you gifts to the LORD; everyone whose heart so moves him shall bring them—gifts for the LORD: gold, silver, and copper...” (Shmot 35: 4-8) And the list that follows is long and valuable.

The People do not hesitate. Just as in the case of the Golden Calf, Bnei Yisrael hasten to give. To prove the point, I intentionally quote the entire list:

“Men and women, all whose hearts moved them, all who would make an elevation offering of gold to the LORD, came bringing brooches, earrings, rings, and pendants—gold objects of all kinds. And everyone who had in his possession blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats’ hair, tanned ram skins, and dolphin skins, brought them; everyone who would make gifts of silver or copper brought them as gifts for the LORD; and everyone who had in his possession acacia wood for any work of the service brought that.” (Shmot 35: 20-24)

The People gave without pause, until: **“...all the artisans who were engaged in the tasks of the sanctuary came, each from the task upon which he was engaged, and said to Moses, ‘The people are bringing more than is needed for the tasks entailed in the work that the LORD has commanded to be done.’ Moses thereupon had this proclamation made throughout the camp: ‘Let no man or woman make further effort toward gifts for the sanctuary!’ So the people stopped bringing:”** (Shmot 36: 4-6)

Bnei Yisrael’s desire to give was so powerful that it had to be contained, and they had to be told to stop.

Generally, people want to give and just wait for an opportunity to do so. If the cause is worthy and meaningful, generosity flows. There are no considerations of ego, conscientiousness, or prestige; only giving for heaven’s sake.

Why is this? What is there in the act of giving that gives us so much pleasure? And what is the connection between giving and atonement, as mentioned in our parasha?

Various Kabbalistic approaches, particularly that of the “Ba’al HaSulam” (Rabbi Yehuda Leib Halevi Ashlag, who passed away in 1954), tell us that human beings carry a constant degree of guilt. From the moment of conception in his mother’s womb and until the day he dies, a person is in receiving mode. However, he is different from other organisms because he also **knows** how to give, beyond the primal animalistic nurturing instinct. Indeed, all living organisms have a “giving” mechanism: the tree provides oxygen, shade, stable ground, and building material, but it is not aware of doing so and cannot control it. The cat in our yard has kittens, nurses and cleans them with her tongue, and teaches them how to survive, but she does not do so out of conscious choice. Humans do! Ba’al Hasulam maintains that the more humans develop, the more their ability to give and affect change evolves too. When a person gives he becomes more like the Creator, whose entire essence is giving, endowing life.

When a person gives he actualizes the essence of his existence, and the more he gives, the more he actualizes that essence. He received life, sustenance, water, education, air, sun, and nurturing love in order to give in return. If he remains in receiving mode only, he may enjoy the experience, but spiritually something will be lacking, because his higher purpose - that of giving like his Creator - is not fulfilled.

When the current flows in one direction only - that of receiving - we develop guilt. Not the common garden variety of Jewish guilt, but guilt at not fulfilling our purpose - to give, and to continue the act of Creation. Therefore, giving atones for the guilt we feel about being such needy creatures, who continuously ask to receive more and more. As adults, when we receive more than we give, a “negef” - or blight - is created. Something within our existence begins to be diseased. Giving cures us of this blight. It reinstates the healthy flow of life energy. This is why it says **“Each shall pay the LORD a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague may come upon them through their being enrolled”** at the beginning of our parasha.

The Golden Calf was etched into our psyches as a symbol of idolatry lurking in all of us, but it is also marvelous proof of the human desire to give. The statue around which Bnei Yisrael danced was not given to them as a gift. It was cast from their gifts.

Furthermore, the gold used to create the Calf was also a gift. It did not appear out of thin air. A moment before the Exodus, Bnei Yisrael received the instruction to “borrow” objects of silver and gold from their Egyptian neighbors. Those neighbors gave it willingly. These treasures, which were never returned to their Egyptian owners, were called “Bizat Mitzrayim” - the loot of Egypt - by our Sages. Other treasures fell into their hands when the Egyptian army drowned in the Red Sea. Those treasures, which swept onto the beach, were called “Bizat Hayam” - the loot of the sea - by our Sages. Various Midrashim explain that from the former Bnei Yisrael cast the Golden Calf, and from the latter they built the Tabernacle.

In this way, the plot of our giving takes a beautiful twist. The Golden Calf, which is the symbol of receipt of the Egyptian loot becomes elevated by its use in building the Tabernacle, a building whose’ main purposes was giving - both through its construction and also through the half shekel contribution that every person had to give every year, to pay for the upkeep of both the Mishkan and its daily operation. Indeed, it was in the Mishkan, and

later the Temple, that Bnei Yisrael offered their sacrifices - their gifts - again, a clear expression of the human desire to give.

Later, upon the destruction of the Temple, our mechanisms for giving will develop further. Tzedakah will replace sacrifices, **“For I desire goodness, not sacrifice”** (Hoshea 6:6)

From the dawn of their creation, human beings sought to give. The ability to give became more sophisticated. In its lowest form it is in order to receive - compliments, satisfaction, peace of mind. In its higher forms it becomes the fulfillment of our individuality in the world.

Service of the Heart

Purim is over but the rest of our lives lies ahead.

A life of giving - not necessarily giving money or material goods - has a very different quality. What would our lives look like if their essence - if our inner BEING - was that of giving?

Our parasha promises us that by giving we prevent the disease - “negef” - of our souls. Negef means “obstacle”, “hindrance”. Giving removes obstacles, which are like great rocks in the river of life that block the flow. The blocks are formed when we cause an imbalance by excessively wanting, needing, and demanding. Giving for giving’s own sake melts the clogged arteries of our lives and enables the unhindered flow of the river of life.

More than our desire to receive, it appears, we deeply desire to give.

Shabbat Shalom and a beautiful spring,

Elisha