

## Terumah—The Gift That Elevates

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Sometimes we all feel like we're giving more than we get, that we do more than our share, or that our individual needs are being sacrificed for the sake of someone else's happiness. It is an emotional struggle that we encounter in our families and friendships. Why should I give when the other person doesn't reciprocate in the way that I would want? If I give, will I also get what I deserve?

But giving, we might suggest, is much more than a strategy to get something in return, and it is also far more than just about doing our responsible share in relationships and in our communities.

Why do we give, and what does that teach us about what it is to be human?

The great French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas rooted his ethical philosophy in the principle that the face of another person reflects a commanding moral power over us as individuals. It is not a symmetry of reciprocity, a state of equality; rather, we are called upon to subsume ourselves in the presence of the other person, to approach our relations with them through an attitude of radical generosity and giving. In Levinas's view, this posture involves an effacement of ego and an extreme elevation of the other: "Goodness consists in placing myself in being in such a way that the Other would count more than me" (*Totalité et infini*, 277). This responsibility for the other, says Levinas, is not contingent upon reciprocity, upon me getting my "fair share" in return.

Though perhaps we may temper the radical position of Levinas by acknowledging the important ethical state achieved in being able to *receive* the gift of the other with dignity and graciousness. Sometimes when we are at our weakest, we must surrender ourselves to the gift of the

other, releasing ourselves into the grace (*hesed*) of compassion.

As much as evolutionary biologists teach us that we are wired for self-survival and self-protection, that we have evolved as humans to look out for "number one" (and who can deny that selfishness is a powerful obstacle that we all struggle with?), there is a growing realization among scientists and psychologists that we are also deeply "wired to connect" in relationship to others. Our bodies and our minds are more healthy and fulfilled when we find ourselves in loving relationships, when we give of ourselves to the other with an open heart, with a heart made pure (see Mona DeKoven Fishbane, *Loving with the Brain in Mind: Neurobiology and Couple Therapy*, 59-63). When we are at our best, we give not in order to receive; we give in the way that the Hasidic masters speak of the ultimate service to God, the act of *mesirut nefesh*—the giving of one's whole soul to divinity in the moment of worship, and in the fulfillment of the mitzvot. As Martin Buber taught, the self in relation to other persons, and in relation to the world at large, reaches through these encounters toward the ultimate relation with divinity:

Extended, the lines of relationship intersect in the eternal You. Every single You is a glimpse of that. Through every single You the basic word addresses the eternal You. (*I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, 123)

The act of *mesirut nefesh*, several Hasidic mystics teach us, is a process of transcending the prison of our own egotism and self-centeredness; in the moment of devotion, in our deepest prayer, we seek to break open the self-protective walls of our hearts, to make ourselves truly vulnerable to the indwelling of the divine presence. And, as Buber expressed

the matter, we encounter the eternal divine You through the mystery and wonder of our human relationships. In opening our hearts to others with generosity and vulnerability, we come to stand in the radiant and transformative presence of God—the divinity that dwells *within*, not only *beyond* the human.

Indeed, this deep lesson is reflected in Parashat Terumah, the Torah portion for this week:

God spoke to Moses, saying: Tell the Israelite people to bring me gifts (ויקחו לי תרומה) you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him (יִדְבְּנוּ לְבוֹ) ([Exod. 25:1-2](#))

It is this last phrase that calls out to me, as it has spoken to generations of Jewish interpreters. The act of divine service is anchored in a personal state of *nedavah*, of generosity, which is here rendered as the moving and stirring of the heart to the task of giving the gift to God. As Rashi notes in his comments on this verse, the language of *yidvenu libbo* may be understood as *leshon nedavah*—the posture of generous giving, one which is marked, according to Rashi, by an attitude of *ratzon tov*, a good will and full-hearted intention that accompanies the gift. Indeed, we learn from these lines in Exodus that cultivating a heart of giving, being one who realizes the ideal of *yidvenu libbo*, is essential to both the life of piety and ethics. This, the Hasidic masters teach, is the inner meaning of the word *terumah*, for it may be correlated homonymically to the verb *leharim*, to raise up, to reach for the *rom* and *ramah* (the height and summit) of divine glory. When we open our hearts with compassion and generosity, when we liberate ourselves from the enslavement of our egos and our need to self-protect, then we and those with whom we interact become truly *elevated*.

This is further how we may understand the inner spiritual meaning of another well-known verse from this week's parashah: And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them (ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם) ([Exod. 25:8](#)).

So much of Parashat Terumah is devoted to the building of the Mishkan (the Tabernacle), to the detailed instructions for its assembly, delivered by God through Moses. And

interpreters have long noticed the fact that while the text refers to a sanctuary in the singular, God's dwelling place is in the plural—*veshakhanti betokham*, (that I may dwell among them). Thus several Hasidic thinkers, following earlier traditions, have suggested that *veshakhanti betokham* may be understood as the dwelling of the divine presence within the depths of each person. *Betokham mamash*. The divine sanctuary is recast from an architectural sacred space to the temple of the human heart, the holy interior of the human being within which the divine Shekhinah (drawn from the same Hebrew word as *veshakhanti*), the heavenly Indwelling, radiates outward from the inner depths of the self. As we stand before the mystery of God in prayer and mitzvot, we seek to be present to the Divinity that pulses within all things, the Oneness of Being that circulates and nourishes all of life. The *mikdash* (sanctuary) of the heart is felt and known through self-examination and introspection, through attentiveness to the wonder of the world, and through compassion and generosity toward others. In this sense, the act of *terumah* is a process of *mesirut nefesh* before God and our fellow human beings. The path of spiritual enlightenment and elevation is inseparable from ethical discipline as much as it about becoming attuned to the sublime holiness that dwells both within and Beyond.

In opening our hearts to the other with whom we exist in relation, in cultivating an attitude and practice of *terumah*, of giving without expectation of receiving in return, we release the inner divine point of life-giving energy from within ourselves—a *hiyut*, a vitality, that otherwise remains imprisoned in the grip of egotism and selfishness. For as Levinas suggested, the other person that we encounter in the human realm may be seen as a trace of ultimate transcendence—a reflection of the divine mystery, a presence that commands our ethical and spiritual attention.

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