

In Giving We Receive

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Parshat Terumah

Then the Eternal spoke to Moses and told him, “Instruct the Israelites to take an offering for Me.” (Exodus 25:1-2)

The clear intent is that we are to bring an offering and *give* it to G*d, but the Hebrew word that is used just as clearly means *take*. What is the Torah telling us?

When we give – to the Sanctuary, to other charities, directly to those in need, to any causes that are for the betterment of society – we are simultaneously taking. What are we taking?

Our sages teach that one who receives charity benefits the one who gives it even more than s/he (the recipient) is benefitted. How is this so? Because the blessings which come through the giving are of far greater value than whatever it is that has been given.

It was foretold, the Talmud tells us, that Rabbi Akiva’s daughter would die on her wedding day. This caused her, of course, no end of worry. Nevertheless, the day eventually arrived when she married.

That night, after her wedding, when she went to bed, she took a golden brooch from her headdress and stuck it into the wall. In the morning, she was shocked to see a poisonous snake, dead, with the pin of her golden brooch piercing it through its eye! She immediately ran to tell her father.

“My daughter,” asked Rabbi Akiva, “what have you done to deserve such a miracle?”

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“At my wedding,” she replied, “a poor man came and pleaded for a meal to satisfy his hunger. I saw that everyone was too busy with the wedding festivities to help him, so I got up and gave him my own portion that you, Father, had personally served me.”

“That’s it!” her father exclaimed. “That Mitzvah saved your life!”

Another, more recent, tale tells of a wealthy man who stinted on his charitable contributions.

“You are making a mistake,” his rabbi said to him, “if you think that stinting on your charitable donations will make you wealthier. You remind me of a simple peasant farmer who would come to the market place regularly to sell his sacks of potatoes to a merchant. For each sack he placed on the merchant’s wagon, the merchant put a copper coin in a plate. After loading the wagon, they would total the coins (which equaled the number of sacks) and the merchant would then pay the farmer.

“One time, the simple peasant thought that he could make more money by secretly taking a few coins from the plate and slipping them into his pocket, for he saw only the coins and not what they symbolized. Every time the merchant looked away he would take a couple of coins from the plate. When the merchant caught the peasant, he said to him, ‘Don’t you realize that by taking these coins you are only hurting yourself? The more coins in the plate, the more I have to pay you. By stealing these coins, you are not taking from me; you are stealing from yourself!’

“When you withhold your charity,” the rabbi concluded, “you only prevent yourself from receiving the blessings that your donations would bring you, and those blessings are worth far more than the money itself!”

Shabbat Shalom.