



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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בס"ד

תרומה תש"ף
Terumah 5780

What Do We Receive When We Give?

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

The more of ourselves that we give, the greater we become.



PARSHAT TERUMAH IN A NUTSHELL

The Torah's explanation of the design and building of the Mishkan (the portable Temple) is the longer passage in the whole book of Shemot.) It begins this week in Terumah and continues all the way through to the end of Shemot (only taking a short break to tell the story of the Golden Calf).

The Israelites used their own money to build the *Mishkan*, and it became the central place to worship God and a way to see and feel God's presence among the people. The Torah's description of the building of the *Mishkan* is long and detailed to teach us how important it was for the Israelites to put all their effort and care into building it.

The sections of the *Mishkan* discussed in this week's *parsha* include the ark for the tablets of stone, the ark's cover, the table for the showbread, the menorah, the covers and walls of the whole *Mishkan*, the partition, and the altar.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do you think it was important that the Israelites paid for the building of the *Mishkan* themselves?



THE CORE IDEA

Our parsha begins with these words: The Lord spoke to Moshe, saying, "Tell the Israelites to take an offering for Me; take My offering from all whose heart moves them to give." (Shemot 25:1-2) This instruction marks a turning point in the relationship between the Israelites and God. The first new concept introduced here is the *Mishkan* (the travelling home for the Divine Presence as the people journeyed through the wilderness). But more than that, we are also introduced to a new value, summed up in the word that gives our parsha its name, Terumah, meaning, a gift, a contribution, an offering. The parsha is telling us something very important. The act of giving gives us dignity. Receiving does not.

Until that moment, the Israelites had been receivers. Virtually everything they had experienced had been given to them by God. He had freed them from slavery, taken them out from Egypt, led them through the desert, and created a path for them through the sea. When they were

hungry, He gave them food. When they were thirsty, He gave them water. Apart from the battle against the Amalekites (where they themselves fought bravely), they had done almost nothing for themselves.

The Israelites had become dependent, expectant, irresponsible and immature. The Torah records their repeated complaints. Reading them, we feel that they were an ungrateful, difficult, sulky people.

But being dependant on God up until this point was necessary. They couldn't have crossed the sea by themselves. They couldn't have found food or water in the wilderness. Complaining produced results, and so an unhealthy pattern developed. The people complained to Moshe. Moshe turned to God. God performed a miracle. The result was that, from the people's perspective, complaining worked. Now, however, it was time for a change. God was giving them something else entirely. It

had nothing to do with their physical needs and everything to do with psychological, moral and spiritual needs. *God gave them the opportunity to be givers.*

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What are the negatives aspects of having everything provided for you?
2. How is this relationship (the transition from total dependence to responsibility) similar to a parent/child relationship?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Every Friday morning before dawn, the Rebbe of Nemirov would disappear. He could not be found in any of the town's synagogues, or houses of study, or at home. One winter, a Lithuanian scholar came to Nemirov. Puzzled by the Rebbe's weekly disappearance he asked the Rebbe's students, 'Where is he?'

'Where is the Rebbe?' they responded. 'Where else but in heaven? The people of the town need peace, income, health. The Rebbe is a holy man and therefore he is surely in heaven, pleading our cause.' The Lithuanian, amused by how gullible the townspeople were, decided to find out for himself where the Rebbe disappeared to each week. One Thursday night he hid in the Rebbe's house. He heard the Rebbe weep and sigh. Then he saw him take out a parcel of clothes and begin to put them on. They were the clothes of a peasant labourer. The Rebbe then reached into a drawer, pulled out an axe, and went out into the still, dark night. Cautiously, keeping out of sight, the Lithuanian followed him all the way through town and beyond, into the forest. By dawn, the Rebbe was busy chopping down a tree, hewing it into logs, and splitting it into firewood. Then he gathered the wood into a bundle and walked back into the town.

He stopped outside a run-down cottage and knocked on the door. An elderly woman, poor and weak, opened the door. 'Who are you?' she asked. 'My name is Vassily', the Rebbe replied. 'I have wood to sell, very cheap, next to nothing.' 'I have no money', replied the woman. 'You can pay me later', he said. 'I trust you – and do you not trust God? He will find a way of seeing that I am repaid.' The woman was still troubled. She asked 'But who will light the fire? I am too ill.' 'I will light the fire', the Rebbe replied, and he did so, while reciting under his breath the morning prayers. Then he returned home.

The Lithuanian scholar, seeing this, stayed on in the town and became one of the Rebbe's disciples. From that day, when the people of the town said that the Rebbe had ascended to heaven, he no longer laughed, but instead added: 'And maybe even higher.'

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What mitzvah did the Rebbe perform in this story?
2. Why did the Rebbe always do this himself, in secret, rather than asking his followers to act on his behalf?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

One of my early memories, still blazing through the mists of forgotten time, goes back to when I was a child of perhaps six or seven years old. I was blessed to have very caring parents. Life had not given them many chances, and they were determined that we, their four sons, should have some of the opportunities they were denied. My late father of blessed memory took immense pride in me, his firstborn son.

It seemed to me very important to show him my gratitude. But what could I possibly give him? Whatever I had, I had received from my mother and him. It was a completely asymmetrical relationship.

Eventually, in some shop I found a plastic model of a silver trophy. Underneath it was a plaque that read, "To the best father in the world." Today, all these years later, I realise that the plastic trophy was cheap, banal, almost comically absurd. What was unforgettable, though, was what he did after I had

given it to him. He placed it on his bedside table, where it remained – humble, trite – for all the years that I was living at home.

My father allowed me to give him something, and then showed that the gift mattered to him. His actions gave me dignity. He let me see that I could give even to someone who had given me all I had.

There is a seemingly strange of Jewish law that embodies this idea. As Rambam explains, "Even a poor person who is dependent on tzedakah is obligated to give tzedakah to another person." On the face of it, this makes no sense at all. Why should a person who depends on charity be obligated to give charity? The principle of tzedakah is surely that one who has more than they need should give to one who has less than they need. By definition, someone who is dependent on tzedakah does not have more than they need.

The truth is, however, that tzedakah is not only directed to people's physical needs but also their psychological situation. To need and receive tzedakah is, according to one of Judaism's most profound insights, inherently humiliating. As we say in *Birkat ha-Mazon*, "Please, O Lord our God, do not make us dependent on the gifts or loans of other people, but only on Your full, open, holy and generous hand so that we may suffer neither shame nor humiliation for ever and for all time."

Many of the laws of tzedakah reflect this fact. For instance, we are taught that it is preferable that the giver does not know to whom they give, and the recipient does not know from whom they receive. According to a famous ruling of Rambam, the highest of all levels of tzedakah is, "to fortify a fellow Jew and give them a gift, a loan, form with them a partnership, or find work for them, until they are strong enough so that they do not need to ask others [for sustenance]." This is not charity at all in the conventional sense. It is finding someone employment or helping them start a business. Why then should it be the highest form of tzedakah? Because it is giving someone back their dignity.

Someone who is dependent on tzedakah has physical needs, and these must be met by other people or by community as a whole. But they also have psychological needs. That is why Jewish law rules that they must give to others. Giving confers dignity, and no one should be deprived of it. Everyone deserves dignity and self-respect.

The entire account of the construction of the Mishkan, the Sanctuary, is very strange indeed. King Shlomo said in his address at the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem, "But will God really dwell on earth? Even the heavens to their uttermost reaches cannot contain You, how much less this House that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). If that applied to the Temple in all its glory, how much more so of the Mishkan, a tiny, portable shrine made of beams and hangings that could be dismantled every time the people journeyed and reassembled every time

they encamped. How could that possibly be a home for the God who created the universe, brought empires to their knees, performed miracles and wonders, and whose presence was almost unbearable in its intensity?

Yet, in its small but human way, I think what my father did when he put my cheap plastic gift by his bedside all those years ago was perhaps the most generous thing he did for me. And *lehavdil*, please forgive the comparison, this is also what God did for us when He allowed the Israelites to present Him with offerings, and then use them to make a kind of home for the Divine Presence. It was an act of immense if paradoxical generosity.

This tells us something very profound about Judaism. *God wants us to have dignity*. We are not tainted by original sin. We are not incapable of good without Divine grace. Faith is not mere submission. We are God's image, His children, His ambassadors, His partners, His emissaries. He wants us not merely to receive but also to give. And He is willing to live in the home we build for Him, however humble, however small.

This is hinted at in the word that gives our parsha its name: Terumah is usually translated as an offering, a contribution. It really means something we lift. The paradox of giving is that when we lift something to give to another, it is we ourselves who are lifted.

I believe that what elevates us in life is not what we receive but what we give. The more of ourselves that we give, the greater we become.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

How can you implement this ideal into your life?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

"To give and not receive, to act rather than be acted on, to be free and not dependent on other human beings, to be dependent on God alone: these are what give Judaism its distinctive tone of voice. That is what makes tzedakah something other than charity. It is not merely helping those in need. It is enabling the afflicted, where possible, to recover their capacity for independent action. Responsibility lies at the heart of human dignity."

Extract from 'To Heal a Fractured World', p. 184



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. How does the mitzvah to build the *Mishkan* mark a turning point in the relationship between Israel and God?
2. What is found in the law that states that even a poor person must give tzedakah?
3. What are the physical and psychological benefits to the mitzvah of giving tzedakah?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. Once the Israelites were financially invested in the *Mishkan*, they were emotionally and spiritually invested in it also. The people felt responsibility for both the physical structure and the material objects used therein, and ultimately they also cared deeply about the rituals and ceremonies performed within. Up until the point the Israelites had been completely dependent on God in every way. This was their first opportunity to become equal partners with God in and to begin the process of ending their slave mentality in preparation for life in their own land as an independent people.

THE CORE IDEA

1. When everything is provided for you, there is a danger you may lose any sense of its value. You are discouraged from taking responsibility and will not learn the skills necessary to become independent. "The Israelites became dependent, expectant, irresponsible and immature."
2. As babies we are entirely dependent on others to survive. We cry to demand feeding, changing, burping, etc. Young children continue to need all a parent can provide for them, but at some point our parents begin to teach us the skills of living independently, preparing us for adulthood. Some might do this by giving the children in the family responsibility for household chores. Some might give out a weekly allowance and teach financial responsibility or expect their children to get a job and contribute financially. This is what was happening here to the Israelites on a national scale.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The Rebbe spent his time and efforts providing for the needs of the poor woman. He performed the mitzvah of tzedakah. Although this mitzvah is normally a financial contribution, time is valuable, and volunteering time can also fall under this mitzvah. This is also an example of the broader mitzvah of *chesed* (kindness) or *Gemilut Chasadim* (acts of loving-kindness). While the message of the *Covenant & Conversation* focuses on the *terumah* (donation) of the Israelites to building the *Mishkan*, the value is the same (or even deeper) when it is giving of personal time and effort rather than just money.
2. The Rebbe could have arranged for one of his followers to do this on his behalf. However, he wanted to personally fulfill the mitzvah. Despite needing to compromise on other religious values (such as prayer – he had to say the morning prayers while tending to the woman's fire rather than joining the service in the synagogue) and despite compromising on his status and dignity as the Rebbe of the town (he disguised himself as a labourer and performed manual labour that was not considered befitting of a holy man) he sought a different kind of dignity by fulfilling this mitzvah personally. Also, as Rambam teaches us in *Hilchot Mattenot Aniyim*, an anonymous donation is far greater than a public donation.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. This should become an underlying value forming the foundation of the decisions we take in life. The careers we choose, the way we spend our leisure time, and the way we allocate our resources, must all reflect this ideal. It is important also to remember that "the more of ourselves we give" does not only refer to our financial resources, but to our time, energy, and creativity.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Up until this point, the Israelites had been dependant on God for everything. When they were hungry, He gave them food. When they were thirsty, He gave them water. And when they were discontented, they complained. The building of the *Mishkan* was the first time they had been asked to take responsibility for something, much in the same way as a child becomes a young adult and is asked to take some responsibility for their lives in preparation for adulthood.
2. Tzedakah is not only directed at people's physical needs. To need and receive tzedakah is inherently humiliating. Someone who is dependent on tzedakah has physical needs, and these must be met by other people or by the community as a whole. But they also have psychological needs. That is why Jewish law rules that they must give to others. Giving confers dignity, and everyone deserves dignity and self-respect.
3. *Tzedakah* is a way to address the physical needs of the community, ensuring that those who are in need are taken care of. However, the mitzvah of tzedakah also addresses the psychological needs of the giver. We all have the psychological need to feel we are contributing to society and not just taking from society. Giving to society leads to a sense of dignity which is of critical importance to all human beings. Additionally, a giving society is one that is strong, caring for the weak and helping wherever needed. These laws helps us to become a strong community, where every member is cared for and valued.