

The Torah Any Times

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Mr. Charlie Harary

A Gift of Our Heart

A few years ago, I was sitting in an office in Manhattan, its captivating city views facing opposite me. Inside, I glanced from side to side, taking in the hanging pictures which featured the office's owner standing next to an array of reputable dignitaries, celebrities and politicians. Behind the pictures was a desk filled with deal toys, or so-called trophies, which must have been gifted to him at the close of a deal.

Aside from all this, though, my eyes wandered to something peculiar. It was a small glass case with a tie inside. But the tie was not something you'd expect anyone to wear. It was ugly, to give it a word. I couldn't envision anyone feeling comfortable walking around in it, and I certainly couldn't understand why this respected business owner had made such an artifact visible for everyone to see. The entire time I spent there, I couldn't shake the thought of why this glass case with this tie was situated there. It was so evidently out of place.

After the meeting had concluded, I approached the business owner, my curiosity in toe. "Can I ask you something?" I asked. "Sure, what is it?" "That frame over there, with the tie inside... What's the story behind it?" "Oh that," he said. "Actually, I received that for my fiftieth birthday from my son. My wife planned this special gala and

invited a bunch of my family and friends. I received a lot of gifts and it was a spectacular evening. Towards the end of it, my son came up to me with a gift. I unwrapped it, and there this tie was. It wasn't the most flattering, to put it mildly. "Where'd you get this?" I asked him. "Your credit card," he replied. "And where you'd get my credit card?" I asked further. "Mommy!" The look in his eyes was irresistible.

"I remember that day," the owner said with a gleam in his eye. I could see the owner's love that welled up within him as he cast his mind back to that moment, his son's joy overwhelming everything else that surrounded that birthday evening. "I put it here because my son gave it to me. No matter what it looks like or what other people think, he gave it to me. And if he gave it to me, well, then, that's the most precious thing a father could have. That's the most precious thing I could hang here in my office." The man's eyes stared back at the tie, its ugliness fading into oblivion, beauty and love replacing it.

And with that, I shook his hand, and made my way out the door, the oscillating thoughts that swirled in my mind making me think about the beauty that such gifts can bring to life.

There are many types of gifts in life, but two primarily occupy our exchanges with others. One is a gift we give for a gift we get. In that re-

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IN THIS ISSUE

Mr. Charlie Harary
A Gift of Our Heart
Rabbi Chanan Gordon
Ten Years Later
Rabbi Meyer Yedid
Walk with the Wise
Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair
Hypocritical Growth
Rabbi Label Lam
The Rejected Stone

DEDICATIONS

L'iluy Nishmat
R' Elchonon Yaakov z"l ben R' Shmuel
Pinchos
Manish ben Esther
Meir Eliyahu ben Yaakov Dov
Bechor ben Rivkah
Shlomo Zalman ben
R' Mordechai Yisroel Tzvi
Esther bat
haRav Avraham Halevi z"l
Moshe Simcha ben Doniel Dov Ber
Miriam bat Yeshayahu
Malka Bracha bat Shimon Chaim
R' Zechariah Shimon ben Yitzchok
L'refuah Sheleima
Deena bat Shoshana
Chaya Raizel bat Dena
Yerachmiel Eliyahu Ben Esther Riva
Reuven ben Rochel

gard, it's not really a gift in the purest sense of the word. We give something because we want something in return. It need not be a tangible gift we receive in return. We may give something because we are seeking appreciation in turn. We may want to be liked by the receiver or gain something else that otherwise may not have motivated them to hand it off to us.

But then there is another type of gift. And this type of gift doesn't have anything attached to it. It is not fueled by an underlying motivation for something to come back to us and enhance our own lives in self-interested ways. It emanates from a place within which whispers to us, "I love you... I like you... and I want you to know that." But we then wonder how such emotions can be expressed. How can they be packaged in ways that will touch the other's heart?

Words are tender and words can touch others, but there is something we look to enwrap such sentiment around. And we call that a gift. But this gift is vastly different than the first kind.

This was the kind of gift this father received from his son.

It didn't need to look nice. In fact, it could have been the most unappealing item of all. Your child brings home a drawing and you can't make out what it is. But they hand it to you, their eyes glistening with that unadulterated love that melts your heart, and all you say is, "Thank you, sweetie." It is a token of nothing less than pure love. And that is the greatest gift.

When G-d asked of us the build the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, he turned to us and requested that we bring donations. Gold, silver, turquoise wool, scarlet... you name it. The Mishkan was a magnificent home, an abode for nothing less than the Divine Presence.

But it's hard to understand why

G-d would ask us to bring our possessions and contribute them toward the building of the Mishkan. Here we are a nation of slaves who have just been liberated from the claws of Egypt, and G-d is asking for us to hand over our belongings to Him. G-d owns everything in the world. Why can't he just give us the Mishkan entirely ready to go? Or at the least, why can't He provide us with the material and we'll build it. Why must we, a nation just freed from the shackles of bondage, donate what we have?

The Torah tells us something particular. It calls for those who give anything to the Mishkan to give a "donation of the heart."

Hashem doesn't need anything from us. He doesn't need our gold or our silver. He has everything He'll ever need. But there is one thing Hashem wants from us.

Our heart. The gift of our heart.

Yes, our gift would take the shape of valuables, but that was just the exterior casing; that was just the tie. What rested inside, what was really desired above all else was... our heart.

That is how G-d builds His home. With our hearts.

Hashem owns everything in the world. Giving him another nugget of gold is not going to make Him any wealthier or make Him any happier. But what He does seek from us, what He does want from us is a relationship. And at the nucleus of such relationship is our heart, our feelings, our yearnings and desires to love Him. And love Him deeply and dearly.

Judaism asks a lot of us. It requires that we take action and sculpt our lives in many different ways around religious practice. We may head to shul and give charity; we may shake a Lulav, eat matzah, or conduct a host of other actions. And in this process, it's easy to get caught up with the feeling that we're doing this in ex-

change. G-d needs something from me. "Okay, G-d... here it is. Here's my mitzvah..." And then we wait. We look and wait for what G-d will give us in return. I gave you charity, G-d, so give me back in return what I need. We are transactional with G-d, engaging in a form of exchange.

But this isn't a real relationship. That is Amazon.com. Hashem is looking for something else. Something very, very different.

"It doesn't need to be perfect," He tells us. "It's not really about the gift. You don't need to get it all right. It can even be a tie that is not the most perfect and extravagant of all. All I want is you. A relationship with you. Your heart." That's all G-d asks of us, implores from us, His dear, beloved children.

Feeling this, the outpouring of a gift to G-d is a beautiful gesture. It flows forth with undulating emotion, with unreserved love. It is a gift, perhaps even a physical gift, but beneath it beats our heart. G-d doesn't look just at our hands. He doesn't just look at what we hand over. He looks at our hearts. And if that's there, we have everything.

G-d loves you. He always has and He always will. Like a father, willing and wishing for his son to give him a gift, but not because the father needs it. The father has everything he needs. But because he wants to feel his son's heart. He wants to feel the pulse of his love and look into his eyes and cry together with him, loving him forever and ever. And then some more.

There's nothing more beautiful and beloved than that.

Rabbi Chanan Gordon

Ten Years Later

The year was 1997 at Harvard Law School. Along with several other Orthodox rabbis and some other reform and conservative rabbis, we had gathered together to discuss what it means to be a Jew.

As the discussion wound itself down, I noticed out of the corner of my eye a young lady. She looked somewhat distressed, though I couldn't be sure what the reason was. At any rate, she approached us and engaged in a few words, adding that she planned on making her way to California in the near future. Living there myself, I added that if she needed a place for Shabbos, she should be sure to reach out and I'd ensure that all accommodations for her would be taken care of. I had never met the woman before, and I knew nothing about her. But like one Jew looking after another, the words had escaped my mouth, and I wished to be of any help I could, knowing that she most likely was not native to California and would

be a guest looking for a place to stay.

Ten years later, I was at a Gateways Pesach program along with Rabbi Akiva Tatz and his family. Minutes before we were about to begin one of our meals, Rabbi Tatz approached me. "Chanan," he said, "there's a woman I just met outside and she asked if she could join us for the meal. Would you mind?" I replied that I would be just fine with it, and a few minutes later, she was brought into the room.

And that's when it happened.

She made eye contact with me and I made eye contact with her. And it clicked.

"Are you the rabbi from Harvard who told me that I should reach out if I needed a place to stay?" She looked very familiar, and by now, I had no doubt that it was the same woman. "Yes, I am," I said, reeling in amaze what was unfolding right before me. "I must tell you that your invitation helped me more than I can put to words. I was going through a very difficult time in my life then, and the warmth and hospitality you showed me that day made me real-

ize that I wanted to look more into a Jewish life. And sure enough, I made my way to Israel not too long afterwards, and from there became a fully-fledged Orthodox Jew."

I wasn't sure if I was hearing everything right. I hadn't said that much to her. Nothing more than extend an invitation for her to reach out if she was in the area. But that had made such an impact on her, especially during those dark hours in her life, that it played a role in being the impetus for her to return to Judaism.

We never know what something will do to impact another. We just don't know. But don't think that something small is small. It may be small to you, but it may mean so much more to someone else.

Perhaps you are only one person in this world, but without question, you can be the world to someone else.

Rabbi Meyer Yedid

Walk with the Wise

If you want wisdom, where do you go? "If you walk with wise people," Shlomo Hamelech tells us, "you will become wise." This is an unbelievable statement. Who would have thought such a thing? Imagine I tell you that if you want to become a mathematician, you should walk with mathematicians. What does that help, you'd

wonder? Maybe you meant I should study with them and under them, and gain from their wisdom and insight? How does taking walks with them influence my mathematical understanding?

This is the wisdom of Shlomo Hamelech. If you want to have a healthy mind, be around healthy people. If you want to be a happy person, be around happy people. If you

spend time with complainers, you will likely become a complainer. As much as humanely possible, surround yourself by healthy-minded people. People who have the right priorities, the right values in life, and people who are modest and humble and who understand and appreciate life will influence your own mind in these very same ways.

To be wise, walk with those who are wise.

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Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Hypocritical Growth

It's an ordinary day. You're praying in the morning just like every other day, and then suddenly you feel a strong spiritual connection with Hashem. You suddenly feel the desire to pray even longer and focus on your Shemonah Esrei with lots of concentration. But a moment later, you think to yourself, "Come on, that's not me. I always pray a quick Shemonah Esrei. Who am I to act all holy and devout?" And you lose that moment of inspiration, and you go about your habitual way of doing things.

How's this scene.

It's an ordinary day and you're faced with an inappropriate piece of media. It's just the kind of thing you look at all the time. After all, who are you? But then you feel something different. You have a moment when you think to yourself, "I really shouldn't be looking at this." And then just as quickly,

another moment later, in a fraction of a second, you push that feeling down and tell yourself, "Who do you think you are? You've looked at this countless numbers of times before. And then probably you're going to go on looking at it for the rest of your life. You'll look at it again tomorrow. Who do you think you are?" And just like that, you extinguish that moment of inspiration.

One of the greatest internal challenges we all face and the challenge that prevents many of us from growing as people is the feeling of being a hypocrite, the feeling that that's not really who I am. Who am I to learn or pray at an intense level today... I'm not that kind of person. Who am I not to go on a vacation to that kind of impure location where I know I'll see all kinds of things I shouldn't? People see me there many times and I don't think I'm any better than they are. Why shouldn't I go? Am I better than the people that do?

This is all a trap. This is the thinking of the yetzer hara.

We're all hypocrites. In fact, the only way to grow is to be different than the person you were yesterday. The very definition of being better is in direct comparison to the lower level you were on yesterday. Anyone who grew at all in their lives had to be, so to speak, a hypocrite.

The next time you have a moment of inspiration, a moment of motivation, grab it. Grab it with both hands. The next time you feel the strength to stand strong in the face of a test, seize it, seize that strength. It'll be worth it. Even if you don't see a significant, permanent change in your behavior, that moment defines who you are. That moment in itself was a major step in your growth as a person. Maybe it was only for a split second, but that split second changed you for the rest of your life. You're a different person now. You touched greatness.

Rabbi Label Lam

The Rejected Stone

Whenever we recite these words in Hallel, "The stone that the builders despised and rejected has become the cornerstone," I picture a certain archway in the Old City in Jerusalem, where all the stones are

very similar, except for the one that sits on the top, in the middle. It's a quarter cut, a triangle, and I imagine the builders are picking it up and throwing it off to the side. What do we need this one for? Until they realize that this is the one that holds both sides together. Dovid Hamelech

is telling us that that is his story. And that's our story. That's everybody's story. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos says, "Don't disparage anybody," because everyone has their time and place and their reason for being.

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