

EREV YOM KIPPUR—THE GIVERS

It is said that there are three types of givers in the world, the flint, the sponge, and the honeycomb. To get anything out of a flint, you must hammer it, and then you get only sparks. The sponge gives generously, but you do have to squeeze it to get it to give. But the honeycomb overflows with its own sweetness. Giving is just part of its nature. How can we be more like the honeycomb?

Continuing the theme of the lessons we can learn from our elders here at Beth Abraham who have passed away, tonight I want to focus on those who I can best describe as givers. I have in front of me several tzedaka boxes, a fancy one, a homemade one, and the one you are probably most familiar with, the classic blue “pushke” from the JNF that mostly went to plant trees in Israel. Tzedaka is a concept that nearly everyone in this room is intimately familiar with, from the quarters you put in these boxes as schoolchildren to the donations you make to a variety of cause that flood your mailboxes, inboxes, and Facebook feeds. Tzedaka is translated as charity, but it literally means righteousness or even justice. In Judaism we are required to give because it is the righteous thing to do and to make our world a just and fair place.

But today I want to talk to you about a slightly different kind of giving, a different midah or value than tzedaka, something called nedivut, which means voluntary giving, or less literally but perhaps more accurately, generosity. It can be generosity of money, time, or spirit. Nedivut is more an attitude than a deed. On this Yom Tzom Kippur, this day of the Fast of Yom Kippur, when we deliberately withhold luxuries and even necessities from ourselves, it should cause us to think about what we withhold from others when we are in a position to help. How do we move from an attitude of holding tight to an attitude of giving freely? It’s not an easy task for any of us, certainly not me. It’s not necessarily human nature to think this way, at least for some of us. It has to be cultivated.

Today I want to share how this midah of nedivut or generosity is modeled by our Biblical ancestors, how it was modeled by some really incredible “givers” in our congregation who have passed away, and, finally, how we can cultivate this kind of generosity ourselves.

This nedivut or generosity is shown by Abraham and Sarah when they rush to provide food and hospitality to the three angels who appear outside their tent. Let’s be honest, though, it is Sarah who does all the work after Abraham says “quick, make some cakes.” Still, this nedivut was there from the very beginnings of the Jewish people.

This nedivut or generosity is shown in even greater amounts, literally, when Rebecca personally draws water not only for Eliezer and his servants, but for all their camels. Camels drink a lot of water after a long journey, and there were 10 of them. That’s somewhere between 150 and 250 gallons of water that Rebecca drew from the well for a complete stranger. Talk about generosity above and beyond the call of duty, and Rebecca becomes the ancestor most associated with the value of generosity or nedivut.

The Israelites as a whole show this generosity when building the Mishkan, the tabernacle in the wilderness in the Book of Exodus. Everyone with a willing heart, in Hebrew a “nedav libo, there’s the root of the word for the midah of nedivut, brings gifts to Moses: gold, silver, copper, fine linen, acacia wood, spices, oils, and precious stones. They bring so much

that, for perhaps the only time in Jewish history, Moses has to say “Stop, the people are bringing too many gifts.” Can you imagine that?

That kind of generosity then becomes built in to Jewish law in the Book of Leviticus with its elaborate system of sacrificial offerings. They can be difficult to relate to, but if we consider that they are essentially a way to train us to be generous, they begin to make a lot more sense.

That’s our Biblical heritage of *nedivut*. And many of us were blessed to know actual people who lived their lives this way. Here are some of the TBA *nedivut* heroes.

There was Les and Alice Kessler, two benefactors of the East Bay Jewish community. I want to start with them because they are part of a 5th generation Beth Abraham family, from Les’ father to the preschooler we have today. They gave not only to the synagogue, but to just about every East Bay Jewish cause—the Federation, the Reutlinger Center, Jewish Family and Children’s Services, and many more. My favorite gift of the Kesslers is this giant, gold colored *Yad*. They brought it back from Morocco, and it has this unique compartment where spices could be kept, symbolic of the incense that burned in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. We keep it on the Torah scroll from which we read the *Maftir Aliyah*, which is, appropriately, in the Kessler’s case, about the extra offerings brought on holidays. We are also lucky to have the 5th generation Kesslers in our preschool today, so they are still reaping what Les and Alice sowed.

One of the Kesslers’ best friends was Joe Zatkin, part of another multi generational family who have been such an important part of the fabric of TBA for decades, whose children are in our religious school and whose matriarch, Vera is, thank God, still with us today. Joe came to see me my first day at work, trudging up the office stairs and filling me in on the “world according to Joe.” I’ll get back to that conversation in a moment. Joe had very humble beginnings. Joe grew up at a Jewish orphanage in San Francisco, and he gave so generously, especially to the Jewish Federation, because he never forgot that the Jewish community literally took him in. But he not only gave, he solicited others to give to Federation from 1969 until his death in the late 2000’s. He told me that to be a good solicitor, you have to give a gift yourself. You can’t ask anybody to do what you haven’t done. And if I go to see you about a pledge of \$5000, I have to have given \$5000, or more, because if you turn around and ask me, “What do you give,” I don’t want to be embarrassed. He also was perhaps most responsible for the property acquisitions that led to the Centennial Project. We were waiting for the decrepit houses owned by a man named Larry Ward to go on sale. He decided to knock on his door and simply make him an offer. He succeeded. He was not sure our community had the generosity to complete the project, which brings me back to the conversation in my office on my first day of work back in 2001. He was telling me that our synagogue did not have a culture of giving and that no one knew how to ask around here and grumble, grumble, grumble. I immediately asked him to donate money for all 250 new *Etz Hayyim* *chumashim*. He said yes without hesitation.

Leonard Quittman was another of our great congregational givers. He didn’t have a lot of money to give himself, but without his and his family’s generosity, we would not be where we are today. Leonard’s Father, Sol Quittman, is the hero of the “Padlock on the Front Door” story. For those who are not familiar with that story, after this building was finished in 1929, because of the Great Depression, we immediately were unable to make payments on it. As a result, the Sherriff padlocked the doors just before the High Holidays so we would be unable to use it. Sol Quittman undertook an emergency sale of lifetime seats so we could get back into the building by *Yom Kippur*. It worked. Inspired by that story so it would never happen again,

Leonard Quittman created an Endowment Fund, and he wouldn't stop raising money for it until it hit one million dollars. It now sits at over 2 million dollars, was the primary funder of the Centennial Project, the Courtyard/Next Big Thing Project, and hundreds of other synagogue functions and programs. And it is still there for the proverbial rainy day or earthquake.

Jeannette Jeger was another incredible TBA giver. Along with her sister Misia, who, Baruch Hashem, is still with us, she survived the Holocaust by hiding in farms and fields. Eternally grateful for the generosity given to her by righteous gentiles throughout her journey, she passed that generosity on to others. She gave a lot of both her time and money, and two examples of the way she gave illustrate her understanding of the middah of nedivut, generosity, though one of them is not particularly flattering to me. When I first started she was one of the people in charge of an East Bay communal Women's Seder. She asked me for a donation from the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund. I asked her to give me some time to think about it. My fund didn't have much money in it when I started, and I wanted to know more about the specifics of the Seder, the content, whether they really needed more money, etc. She simply didn't understand why I would have to think about it even for a moment. When Jeannette asks you to give, you are supposed to say yes immediately and ask questions later. She was right, and I still feel bad about my response to her years later. She always gave first and asked later. By contrast, when Jonah was born she called me in the hospital and said, "I am catering the Bris, no questions asked. I will pay for it and I will prepare it in the TBA kitchen. Anyone else in the kitchen should either volunteer to help me or get out of my way."

Finally, I want to point to the generosity of another Holocaust survivor, maybe the best known person of all the people I have mentioned, though not necessarily and that is Henry Ramek. He loved to give of his time, money, and voice. The man loved to lead services, to pray with his special kavanah/intentionality and cries to God. He could never get enough of leading, which was sometimes a problem, to be honest. But it wasn't because he wanted the glory. He could just never thank God enough for sparing his life, which was what he believed. He loved to give both his time and money. He filled the tzedaka box at minyan often all by himself. He taught all the Bar Mitzvah boys in the synagogue how to put on tefilin, and they would leave his house not only knowing how to lay tefilin, but with a crisp \$100 bill. I remember once going out to lunch with him when he gave a \$30 tip on a \$25 bill. I was looking at the bill, thinking, maybe he couldn't see it since his eyesight isn't all that great. He figured out exactly what I was doing and said: "Rabbi, there are all kinds of tzedaka." And then he went on to explain why he always wanted to give as much as he could. The real bank account is with Hashem, and it is our deeds, he said. We make deposits, He keeps them safe, and lets us withdraw if we are lucky. No one who ever met Henry could forget him or his stories. I will never forget his generosity.

Les, Alice, Joe, Jeanette, Leonard, and Henry, these were incredible givers, true role models, and there are so many more who I could have mentioned. It's nice to praise them, but how do we go about cultivating this kind of generosity in ourselves?

Here are a few ideas. The Chasidic Rebbe Yaakov Yitzchak of Pschischa said that you can train yourself to be giving by starting with something small. For example, he says, accustom yourself to giving others a little of your snuff tobacco. Then do a little more, like letting them enjoy the use of your pipe and so on by degrees, until gradually you are in the habit of being generous." This is not the means I recommend, obviously, and it came from a particular time and place, but the sentiment is right.

You can make lists. There are two ways to do this. First, make a list for yourself of what you would like to receive. Then turn that list around and think about who, other than yourself, would appreciate this kind of gift and go ahead and give it to them. The other kind of list is a what if list. If you have an extra \$100, \$500, or \$1000 to spend, you would spend it on...and list your top 5 things. The second list would be "If you have a day/week/month of time to give, you would give it to..." It starts on paper but could become a reality before you know it.

And finally, you can think about the metaphors with which I began today's sermon, the flint, the sponge, and the honeycomb. Meditate on the honeycomb, which, unlike the flint, which has to be struck and the sponge which has to be squeezed and then remoistened, the honeycomb has a never ending supply of sweetness to give. It's like the song we sometimes sing in the Gan "it's just like a magic penny, hold it tight, and you won't have any. Lend it, spend it, you'll have so many, they'll roll all over the floor, oh, love is something if you give it away, give it away, give it away, love is something if you give it away, you'll end up having more.

Judaism fundamentally believes that, by and large, those who are generous will be repaid, in kindness if not in kind. If you put out *nedivut*, generosity into the world, it will come back to you. You will get rewarded, surely in the World-to-Come and maybe even in this world too.