



The Gift of Asking  
Parshat Terumah  
By: Rae Ringel

For generations, tzedakah has been a pillar of the Jewish community. The rabbis of classical Judaism praised tzedakah, calling it “equal in value to all the other commandments combined.” Perhaps tzedakah is viewed so highly because it encapsulates so many integral Jewish values: loving your neighbor, respecting others, repairing the world and performing righteous acts. But what about the critical job of the solicitor? Do we consider the vital and inspiring role of the tzedakah collector? How is the act of asking someone for money a sacred Jewish experience?

As an executive coach and a teacher of fundraisers, I believe that any one in the Jewish fundraising business should know Parshat Terumah which introduces the most successful campaign in Jewish history. The Jewish people come together for the first time and giving all that they had, built the Mishkan.

Early on in my career, I found it daunting to reframe the concept of asking people for money. We all hold onto assumptions about the “schnurer” and the calls interrupting dinner. I looked to Jewish sources for a new perspective, and I found many texts that related to the giving of tzedakah. But where were all of the texts about asking? How would I make my case?

Then, I found the gift I was looking for -- the first tractate of the Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra, deals extensively with the matters of charity. In it contains the following phrase, “He who causes others to do good is greater than the doer”.

I rest my case. If a person convinces another person to give, his or her reward is greater than when giving personally. I was particularly drawn to the Hebrew play on words, “mi-aseh min ha-oseh,” meaning greater is the one who activates than the one who acts. The word “mi-aseh” is a causative verb. It’s about enabling, leading, inspiring and guiding. The other person still makes the choice to act in the end, but the asker has a hand in directing the action.

When you ask someone for tzedakah, you give them an opportunity to perform a mitzvah that they may not have done on their own. You are leading them to perform a righteous act and helping them to change the world. With this new perspective, the donor should actually thank you for asking!

In the same tractate, the following verse is cited, “and they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament and they that turn many to righteousness are like the stars forever and ever.” The Talmud explains that the second part of the verse “and they that turn many to righteousness” refers to the collectors for charity. This is another reference where the collectors of charity are leading people to do good in the world. Further strengthening our case, the askers are likened to bright stars in the sky.

With these sources as our backing, how do we embrace a new attitude about asking? First, we can remind

ourselves that asking is a privilege. If you believe in your institution, than you need to believe that raising funds for your institution is an honor and a privilege.

Secondly, remember to reach for the person, not the pocket. Days, weeks and months after a solicitation, the donor will not remember what you said. They will remember how they felt when they were with you. Did you listen? Were you passionate about your product? In the moment of the solicitation, you represent your entire institution and how people feel about you can directly affect how they feel about the work you do. More often than not, people get involved in and give to organizations because someone they cared about and respected asked them to join. Remember this, and use it as a way to build relationships and commitment to causes.

Lastly, look back in our history to see what can be holy about a campaign. In Parshat Terumah, God says, “You will build for me a sanctuary and I will dwell in your midst” (betoacham). I’ve wondered, “What is betoacham?” Did God dwell in the midst of the Mishkan builders together in their collectively? Or did God dwell in every person who contributed and helped build the Miskcan? The plural form of betoacham certain suggests in their collectivity. But, ultimately, I think it’s both. And as a result, my personal mission in asking becomes two-fold. First, I try to inspire the donor to perform a mitzvah and validate their willingness to take on a righteous and holy act. But secondly (and maybe more importantly), I explain to the donor that they are taking part in collective effort to build community. This kind of collective effort is what God wanted us to do with the Mishkan, and still wants us to do today...even in this economy.

Consider redefining solicitation in your minds. Remember the formula: asking is a privilege, reach for the person, not the pocket and harness the holiness. Because the biggest gift that you’ll get from asking will ultimately not be measured in dollars, but in moments of human connection. And really -- who could ask for anything more?

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