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“Give, Surely...”

Reb Dovid Leib Schwartz, a Viznitzer chasid endearingly referred to as der Heilige Schnohrer, ‘the Holy Beggar’, was a beloved and well known gabbai tzedakah in Bnei Brak. One of the neighborhood’s recognizable, holy characters, he lived with his wife in a single room apartment, and was ‘a regular’ at the shteiblach and minyan factories across the city, and always seem to appear wherever and whenever Jews gathered, shlepping his large plastic tzedakah bucket. He was there for every funeral and simchas for decades, collecting whatever he could for local aniyim, stricken with poverty or illness. Rain or shine, he could be found with his bucket in hand, tirelessly collecting tzedakah for those in need. When Reb Dovid Leib entered the room, Rav Chaim Kanievsky, zt”l, would stand in his honor.

Reb Dovid Leib was completely dedicated to others, yet he himself lived in complete poverty; he was a baal yisurin who, despite his own suffering, refused to take a single agorah for himself and his wife. He could also be found learning sifrei Kabbalah at all hours of the night in one of the local shuls.

At weddings, he would circulate among the guests during the seudah, wishing

them mazel tov and enabling them to do the great mitzvah of tzedakah. Among the guests, there were sometimes those who were not thrilled that their meal was interrupted. They would begrudgingly reach into their pockets and flip a couple of coins into his bucket. Once, he approached an unhappy person who was at that moment overeager to dig into his schnitzel. This man suddenly lost his temper and slapped Reb Dovid Leib across the face. An embarrassing scene unfolded in front of the large crowd, but Reb Dovid Leib was not fazed in the slightest. Barely flinching from the blow, he replied with absolute calm: “Ah! Good, good. That was for me...but what about something for the aniyim?”

Our sedra focuses our attention on the importance of being attuned to the needs of our brothers and sisters, and ‘doubles down’ on the obligation to give tzedakah:

כִּי־יְהִיֶה֩ בְךָ֨ אֲבִיּוֹן֙ מֵאַחַד֙ אַחֶיךָ בְּאַחַד֙ שְׁעָרֶיךָ...
לֹא־תֵאֱמָץ֙ אֶת־לִבְּךָ֙ וְלֹא־תִקְפֹּץ֙ אֶת־יָדְךָ֙ מֵאֲחִיךָ
הָאֲבִיּוֹן׃ כִּי־פִתַח֙ תִּפְתַּח֙ אֶת־יָדְךָ֙ לּוֹ וְהַעֲבַט֙
תַּעֲבִיטֶנּוּ֙ דֵּי־מַחֲסוֹ֙ אֲשֶׁר־יִחְסֹר־לוֹ

If there will be among you a needy person, from one of your brothers in one of your cities... you shall not harden your heart, and you shall not close your hand from your needy brother. Rather, open, you shall surely open your hand to him, and you shall lend him sufficient for his needs, which he is lacking. (15:7-8)

The double language of פתח תפתח, ‘open, you shall surely open’ paints a visual cue as it implores us to open both of our hands in generosity. The verse is also preceded and followed by two mitzvos of giving: separating tithes and observing shemittah. In dedicating a tenth to charity, we express in action our belief that we are not the ultimate owners of our possessions. During shemittah, one demonstrated radical emunah by forgiving the loans he had extended, as well as setting free his indentured servants once their rehabilitative service was complete. Both commandments involve open-handedness, פתח תפתח a relinquishing ownership and letting go, and a deep trust in HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

These Torah continues:

נתון תתן לו ולא ירע לְבָבְךָ בְּתִתְּךָ לוֹ כִּי בְגָלֵל
הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה יִבְרָכְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל־מַעֲשֶׂיךָ וּבְכָל
מַשְׁלַח יָדְךָ...פְּתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת־יָדְךָ לְאָחִיךָ לְעִנְיָהּ
וּלְאֲבִינָהּ בְּאַרְצְךָ:

Give, you shall surely give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him; for because of this thing Hashem will bless you in all your work and in all your endeavors...you shall surely open your hand to your brother, to your poor one, and to your needy one in your land. (15:10-11)

On this subsequent occurrence of doubled terminology, נתון תתן לו, “give you shall surely give,” Rashi interprets: מפילי מאה פעמים, “... even if you do it one hundred times (give readily and without regrets).” We may be able to feel some happiness while performing a single act of limit-stretching generosity — but the true test is in repetition.

A Jew in dire straits, collecting desperately needed funds for his family, once arrived at the door of Reb Mendel Riminov and poured

out his troubles before the tzadik. The Rebbe warmly turned over a large donation. Then, as the Yid turned to leave, the Riminover stopped him and handed him an additional kopek. A curious onlooker asked, “Rebbe, why give him tzedakah twice?”

Reb Mendel responded: “The first time, I gave him because his crying melted my heart. Hearing all his tzaros, I was overwhelmed and gave him as much as I had. After I searched my coat pockets again, I found one more coin. And this I gave to him for the sake of the mitzvah of tzedakah.”

As the Riminover explains, this is the intended meaning of the doubled language of the pesukim in our sedra, פתח תפתח...נתון תתן. Giving has to be done twice. The first act is for ‘our sake’, to open our hearts to empathy, compassion and generosity. This level of tzedakah fulfills our own needs: to give, to let go of the feeling of ownership and entitlement, to have emunah that Hashem will continue to provide for us, and to express love to others. It brings blessing into ‘all our work and all our endeavors’. The second act is honestly just for the sake of the one in need.

May all of us have pockets filled with coins, wallets filled with cash, bank accounts that are overflowing with abundance and portfolios that are flourishing. No one, including ourselves, should lack anything. And also, if by chance, we become aware of someone in need, may our hearts open to give... and give again... and again. For giving tzedakah is certainly a blessing for us — but what about something for the aniyim? ■

We apologize for formatting
Rabbi Mischel's article incorrectly in
last week's edition of Torah Tidbits