

Yom Kippur Kol Nidre Sermon

September 24, 2023

“ תשרי שנת תשפ”ד

“Get on the Side of the Givers”

Story of Grandpa Max

My grandfather died when I was very young but I still have some special memories of him. On occasion, he would come over to our house. And he would always bring with him a stack of silver dollars that he would give to me and my brothers. Before he gave us those silver dollars, though, he would sit us down on the couch in the living room and he would look at us straight in the eyes and say, “boys, If the world would be divided into two camps, the givers and the takers, you should always jump to be on the side of the givers...and if you do that the Hashem will always take care of you. Grandpa Sadoff didn't have a lot of money. Grandpa Max and Grandma Rose had a Pharmacy in South Minneapolis in a lower income area. There were many folks, buying on credit and my grandpa would keep a tab for them. Sometimes people couldn't pay their debt but Grandpa Max always had compassion on them and never cut any of them off-he would always give people whatever they needed. He didn't have a lot of money but he always gave *tzedakah* consistently—I remember the pile of envelopes sitting on his desk where he would be sending checks to various charities and causes. Though he was not of great means, all his needs were met, he led a rich life and had everything he wanted or needed. What I remember about Grandpa Max is that he was always smiling, really always!

Deuteronomy 15:7 reads:

נתון תתן לו ולא ירע לבבך בתתקו לו כי בגלל הדבר הזה יברכה יהוה אלהיך בכל מעשך ובכל משלח ידך:

Give readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return your God יהוה will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings.

That is what Grandpa Max taught us, not just to give *tzedakah* but to be a “giver” as a way of life; of who you are. Biblical Hebrew didn’t have a present tense for verbs the way we understand today; didn’t really exist. The word נתון for example, describes not the action but describes the person who gives; the giver. So when we give something in the so-called present tense, in Hebrew terms we are in that moment of being, “the Giver”. We all can be “the giver, but what sometimes stands in our way?

כי לא יחדל אביון מקרב הארץ על-כן אנכי מצוה לאמר פתח את-ידך לענייך ולאבינך בארץ: {ס}

For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kin in your land.

Devarim 16:11

Some people don’t give *tzedaka* because they don’t think it will make a difference. The Torah here already tells us that we won’t solve the problem of poverty, “there will never cease to need”--- we know this, if we can’t solve the problem, then why give?

לא עליך המלאכה לגמר,

וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוּרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמְּנָה.

Pirkei Avot 2:16 It is not your responsibility to complete the work, but you are not free to neglect it. But we know that. There must be something else.

The Torah in the previous verse reads פָּתוּחַ תִּפְתָּח for the word open to open your hand to give! “ I would translate this as you shall certainly open your hand”---why the emphasis on the act of opening one's hand (two times)? You can imagine what an unopened hand looks like literally—a fist—it is tense, it is holding something, something in it is holding a person back from sharing?

So you may have guessed that in studies the number one reason people close their hands and don't give charity is, “I don't have the financial means”. Of course this is unfortunately true at times. But, let's talk about the other scenario, where we could give if we really wanted to! Imagine that you are using one of your favourite websites, say Wikipedia— and as usual the pop-up to give something back for all of your use pops up on the screen! Come on, we have all clicked the X on that box right?!! Could we really not afford the \$2, \$5 or the 2 minutes to make such a donation. But how many of us have clicked the X and moved on with our search. (I know I have, raise your hand if you also need work here)

Also when I speak about our giving we are not only speaking of our financial resources but also our time and acts of kindness. In Tractate Sukkah 49B we learn three reasons that acts of loving kindness are even greater than giving money.

The Sages taught that acts of kindness are superior to charity in three respects: Charity can be performed only with one's money, while acts of kindness can be performed both with his person and with his money. Charity is given to the poor, while acts of kindness are performed both for the poor and for the rich. Charity is given to the living, while acts of kindness are performed both for the living and for the dead.Tractate Sukkah 49B

Giving is a way of life and part of our ethos and activities at Kehilat Nitzan. We have so many volunteers here at KN and we do so much holy work. Not only do I appreciate the amazing generosity of our board volunteers, committee volunteers, education volunteers, Kiddish volunteers and the pride of Kehilat Nitzan, Fran Feldman's Tikun Olam and our most famous effort, a subsidiary of Tikun Olam, Deb Korman leading our Food Van and volunteers? So, when I just mention that that is who we are as a community! Don't you feel wonderful? And when you actually do these acts of giving, of chesed, for your community and beyond, don't you get more out of it than those who receive the help?

I am going to ask us all for a moment to consider a shift in perspective about why we give. Rather than thinking of why I can't give or to think of giving in terms of what it might accomplish or what problem it will solve or even on occasion when emotionally moved to give —give to become an noten a giver—give because of what you might become, who you might become! We want to move ourselves in moments of holding our fist tight to simply opening our hand and becoming perpetual, permanent and consistent giver. At those moments ask ourselves, who can I become if I jump to the side of the givers always every time? Consider that consistent

givers, no matter what their actual worth, live in a place of abundance. Shefa—in the Hebrew and Kabbalistic spiritual term.

The reason we are sometimes unable to give is scarcity and lack and these feelings are associated with fear. Fear that there won't be enough, right? Kabbalah describes a concept that is the opposite of fear, scarcity and lack, it is the concept of *shefa* - *flow or abundance*: God's good and flow to the created world extends infinitely in every direction. Shefa refers to the flow of God's beneficence in all forms at all times. Imagine a brilliant beam of light emanating from the sun and shining upon your face. This is like the divine light nourishing all of creation. But in troubled times, we tend to self-limit the flow of God's light in our lives: We allow economic woes to diminish our outlook, we feel beaten down in our work, family and ability to contribute. Living in fear takes us out of the flow of *shefa*. It is as though we place the cloud that is blocking the sun.

One of my close friends, for example, started a Hedge Fund from nothing—he had no means of his own. As a result, he was suddenly worth 50 million dollars because of other people's investments and belief in his abilities! Once, we were riding a train together from New York to Philadelphia, the Amtrak Acela, very fast (relatively) and we were having a deep discussion. I asked him what is the hardest thing about suddenly becoming so rich? He said, it is not so easy— I lay awake at night worrying about losing all my money. Oy!

But how do we become more of a giver? If we find ourselves more often on the side of the takers, how do we jump over the side of the givers? When can we do that? When is now a good time?! (You will after all be hearing the YK appeal in a few minutes!)

Because, here is what happens: when you give anything (repeat) your subconscious mind begins to register - **I have** ; **I have** something to give, Key Words: I HAVE rather than focusing on what you don't have, when you begin to give regularly and systematically your subconscious mind begins to turn that into a law that "I AM and I HAVE" and then as you live in the place of "I AM" and " I HAVE" AND I AM GIVING" - that becomes your personal law and you will then see that opportunities show up, synchronicities show up, spontaneous goodness shows up, coincidences or that which appears to be coincidences show up, and then more good flows through your life.

Even changing our language around money can change our life's experience. Rather than speaking about spending or giving— use the word circulating—circulation connotes that what we have comes from adding value to other's lives and by giving with ease, the natural circulation of abundance continues. Imagine the opposite, an economic depression or recession. People tighten up their belts, they stop going out, they stop making purchases, sales are down, businesses go out of business, and the circulation slows all but ceases.

Look, there are times for all of us when we simply don't have the means to give at the level we would like but we must still give. How can we know how? There is for example in our tradition there were donations to the community that were according to a person's means but there was also this concept of tithing (*maaser*). In an agricultural context we would give *maaser*, which translates to a tenth. You give a tenth of whatever you have. We translate that in today's terms and we would be speaking of money. Ask yourself, if a person has only ten dollars but won't give even 1 dollar – 10% *maaser*—do you think they will give \$100,000 when they have a million dollars? Probably not.

By the way, this is one of the most interesting of the commandments — *maaser* or tithing—because it is one place where you can really prove to God that the universe doesn't work that way! Give God the test! One such individual who did this is Rick Warren, a Pastor in California of a mega-Church who began in his early career by giving 10% and making a vow (*neder*) to God that every year he was able to give that amount and do ok he would add a % or more. Last time I heard him speak about 15 years ago, he was giving 92% of his salary to his spiritual community where he is the leader.

I am suggesting, if you are not doing so already, consciously setting out to give a certain percentage of your income to *tzedakah* consistently and systematically? Even 3%--start small and every year increase your percentage and test this scientifically! See if you suddenly find yourself without enough to live comfortably on and see if you can even up the

percentage by say 1% the next year based on your assessment of how you feel and how this is changing your life! Might you end up attracting even more “circulation” when you begin circulating more? At every level you get to look at whether I am leading a prosperous life and then I see I can give more and you will!

Mishneh Torah–Laws of Giving Tzedaka 10:2

(2) Never has anyone become poor by giving to *tzedakah*, nor has anything bad ever come of it, nor has any harm occurred because of *tzedakah*. Anyone who shows compassion, others will show compassion to him...(Deut. 13:18)

How might moving to a mindset of abundance and contribution influence every other area of your life, work, family, volunteering? Notice that influence in Hebrew is להשפיע which is the same word as shefa/ abundance but in the causative form—you are now causing abundance and flow-influence!! You become the side of the givers and now you constantly ask yourself, how can I do more for others in my work. Let me ask you, if you work with the attitude that you want to help others and deliver more help, more healing, more connection, more value, more chesed—what will the result in your life and others be?

Khalil Gibran 1883-1931 in his book “The Prophet” reminds us. The hands of the givers are never empty. When you become a giver, the universe fills it with more to give.

Give God a reason to fill your hands. And remember, you already have everything you need as a spiritual being; you have been given everything. Love, beauty, intelligence, life itself. You already have it. We practise the law of tzedaka, chesed and circulation so it becomes manifest and activated within us.

I want to conclude by sharing one final story with you about my Grandpa Max. His son, my Uncle Bob, z'l who I was very close to. He told me it is because of his father that he still believes there is a God; even though he had not been observant for many years. What do you mean I would ask? Well, you know that your grandpa was always working. Yes, I know. One day a Jewish man walked into the Sadoff pharmacy looking desperate. Max, could you please close up the store and come make a shiva minyan a few blocks from here? There was no one to watch the store in his absence and he never closed unnecessarily but immediately got up and went to do the mitzvah of comforting an avel and making a minyan. While he was away, a semi-truck lost control on that inner city street and rammed right through the front window of the pharmacy, it made its way all the way to the back wall and all was completely crushed—so too would Grandpa Max have seen his last if not for his giving heart and giving soul. And I always hear his voice saying, if the world would be divided into two camps, the givers and the takers, jump to be on the side of the givers - and if you do... God will always take care of you. Shana Tova