

# YEHOYADA'S NUDGE

Vayakhel 5779

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## I.

I'D LIKE TO DRAW YOUR ATTENTION THIS MORNING to three different stories that we read today that all share the same thread. It's a quintessentially Jewish thread – our *parashah*, our special *maftir*, and our special *haftarah* all depict attempts made to solicit funds from the Jewish people for the construction and maintenance of a place of worship. In thousands of years, not much has changed.

Yet all three stories, all three events, portray three different ways that were used to get that money for the *mishkan* (or, in the case of the *haftarah*, the *Beit Hamikdash*). But I believe that these three stories present not just three alternative ways to encourage donations, but also reflect how each one of us may approach our Jewish observance and our *avodat Hashem*, our service of God.

We first read this morning the donations offered by the Jewish people at the beginning of *parashat Vayakhel*:

וַיָּבֵאוּ כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-נִשְׂאָו לְבֹו וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר נָדְבָה רוּחוֹ אֹתוֹ הֵבִיאוּ אֶת-תְּרוּמַת יְהוָה  
לְמִלְאכַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּלְכָל-עֲבֹדָתוֹ וּלְבִגְדֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ:

And everyone who excelled in ability and everyone whose spirit moved him came, bringing to the LORD his offering for the work of the Tent of Meeting and for all its service and for the sacral vestments (Ex. 35:21).

The *pesukim* continue to describe what was brought: all types of jewelry and gold; silver, brass, and high-quality wood; various luxurious and expensive dyes (including *tekhelet* and *argaman*) furs, and skins. The people, caught in the excitement and fanfare surrounding the construction of the *mishkan*, voluntarily donate *everything* – the *mishkan* has an abundance of riches. The people donate willingly so much – so enthusiastic are they – that all that is left for the *nesi'im*, the tribal princes, the wealthiest members of the people, to donate, says *Chazal*, are the precious stones [v.8, based off Num. Rab. 12:16].

Our first story of donation is one of voluntary overflowing generosity: the people donate as much as possible while caught up in the excitement and enthusiasm of the moment.

## II.

Our second story of donation could not be more different. In the special *maftir* for Shabbat *Shekalim* we read of the half-shekel donation required of everyone:

זֶה | יִתְּנוּ כָּל-הָעֶבֶר עַל-הַפְּקוּדִים מִחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל בַּשֶּׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֶשְׂרִים גֵּרָה הַשֶּׁקֶל  
מִחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל תְּרוּמָה לַיהוָה:

This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall pay: a half-shekel by the sanctuary weight—twenty gerahs to the shekel—a half-shekel as an offering to the LORD (Ex. 30:13).

Here, in contrast to the previous description of overflowing enthusiastic donations, the expectations are as low as possible. Each person must simply give one half-shekel. It doesn't matter if they desire to give more – they can't. But, more importantly, this time it is not voluntary, it is mandatory; it's a tax: everyone must give regardless of whether they want to or not.

### III.

What's striking is that we read this second story last week as part of *parashat ki tissa*. Both donation drives take place close in time to one another and yet reflect diametrically opposing views on how to encourage donations.

The way donations are solicited in *parashat vayakhel* realizes the importance of enthusiasm. When people are enthusiastic about something – when they're up for it and excited about what they're doing – there are no limits, there are no boundaries. The people donate everything they can and the *mishkan's* funds are overflowing.

But enthusiasm dies quickly. People grow tired. What was once an enthusiastic project quickly becomes a chore and a burden. But the *mishkan* still needs funds. Enter the half-shekel tax of the *maftir*. Everyone must give it and there are no exceptions. There is no choice involved, it is forced. But in that situation the expectations can only be very low – all you can demand from each and every person is one measly half-shekel. Sure, it's something and it's guaranteed, but it's got nothing on the product of our enthusiasm.

And there's an obvious analogy to our wider Jewish lives. When we are enthusiastic and excited, be it on the spiritual highs of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur or just feeling "it" for whatever possible reason there's no knowing what we can achieve. During our most powerful religious moments our enthusiasm can take us religiously to places we never thought possible: it can be our connection to God, our *tefillah*, or whatever else that can have no limits. We can do anything.

But, most of the time we worship God through the daily, obligatory, grind. I've mentioned before how low the bar is for *kevannah*, intention, in *davening*. It's because halakhah realizes that, when you demand people do something every day, three times a day, the expectations can't be too high. You get a half-shekel and that's it.

Both perspectives end up having tremendous flaws, but also immense potential. But is there actually a way to strip away the negative and leave the positive? Is there a way for us to eat our cake and have it, too? This is where our *haftarah* comes into play.

### IV.

Our *haftarah* takes place many years after the construction of the *mishkan* during the reign of Yehoash, King of Yehudah in the 800s B.C.E. He is faced with a problem: the *Beit Hamikdash* needs funds for repairs. But rather than electing to tax the people, or make a major, exciting fundraising

event, he tasks an influential Kohen, Yehoyada, with figuring out a way to get the funds; Yehoyada does something novel:

וַיִּקַּח יְהוֹיָדָע הַכֹּהֵן אֲרוֹן אֲחָד וַיִּקְבַּח חֹר בְּדַלְתּוֹ וַיִּתֵּן אֹתוֹ אֶצֶל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ בַּיְמִין [מִיְמִין]  
בְּבֹא-אִישׁ בֵּית יְהוָה וַנִּתְּנוּ-שָׁמָּה הַכֹּהֲנִים שְׁמֵרֵי הַסֶּף אֶת-כָּל-הַכֶּסֶף הַמּוּבָא בֵּית-  
יְהוָה:

And the priest Jehoiada took a chest and bored a hole in its lid. He placed it at the right side of the altar as one entered the House of the LORD, and the priestly guards of the threshold deposited there all the money that was brought into the House of the LORD (II Kings 12:10).

While there are various understandings of what exactly Yehoyada did, the simplest understanding is that he creates a very large *tzedakah* box: as people walk in to the *Beit Hamikdash* they see the *tzedakah* box into which, under no obligation, they may place money or give to a Kohen to put money into it.

This innovation is incredibly successful: *Divrei Hayammim*, in a parallel chapter, describes the frequent filling of this *tzedakah* box.

But how is this method successful? You might think it's simply because it's a hybrid, but I believe there is something else at play here. I believe that the *tzedakah* box found in our *haftarah* is an example of a psychological phenomenon being harnessed: what's called a "nudge".

## V.

In a ground-breaking book written over a decade ago, behavioral economist Richard Thaler and legal scholar Cass Sunstein, introduced the world to the nudge. We are fallible beings, us humans: our brains can be easily tricked by a whole host of cognitive biases – we don't even realise we're falling for these tricks, so oblivious are we to our brain's inner workings.

But what if we harness these biases for our own good? If we know, for example, that children are more likely to eat food that's at eye level in a cafeteria, why not switch around the placement of chocolate cake and fruit in schools and help reduce obesity in children? Doing so creates a "nudge" – nudging our brain to make the right choice. Our brain falls for these tricks, and when harnessed for the good, rather than the bad, we are the better for it. (Google, in the office, apparently, does this with soda: water is easily accessible but Coca-Cola, while free, requires a long walk and a lot of reaching and thus discourages employees from over-drinking it.)

And an entire genre of literature both scholarly and popular has sprouted employing these cognitive biases for the good: from saving money, to dieting, to health and fitness – all offer insights, backed by cognitive psychology and behavioral economics.

And once we know about the nudge, we can see that this was Yehoyada's genius. The subtle presence of the *tzedakah* box "nudges" all present to think about donating money. People are already

there, offering their *korbanot*, and they can't help but see out of the corner of their eye the box. Before they know it, they find themselves reaching for their pockets.

## V.

But, despite Yehoyada's ancient nudge, there is one arena that the genre of nudging has not entered: our Jewish observance. And I think this is a mistake: we have so much to gain from creating nudges in all parts of our religious life and it's (relatively) easy. Simply assume you would do the right thing but acknowledge that you're fallible. So, trick your brain in very simple ways to take advantages of your best characteristics and not your worst. And I would like to finish by sharing with you a couple of different examples that illustrate how much benefit we can get from nudges. One is from the *Shulchan Arukh* while the second is my own personal one. And while they're simple – and not particularly exciting – they work incredibly well.

The *Shulchan Arukh* (o.c. 2:4) records the halakhah of tying shoes based on the *gemara* in *masekhet Shabbat* (61a). One puts on the right shoe first, then the left, then ties the left shoe before tying the right. I believe that, among the many reasons given, we can suggest that this is a nudge – by tying our shoes in a specific fashion because it is halakhah, we nudge our brains into think about God and our broader religiosity when doing something as mundane as tying our shoes. This simple moment becomes one for religious reflection.

My own example is the challenge of saying *Birkat Hamazon*. For many, and I am one of them, it's a surprisingly difficult challenge: it's easy to forget to say *Birkat Hamazon* if you don't have a *bencher* near you when you finished. If there's any amount of resistance whatsoever, you either try and say it off-by-heart or tell yourself you'll get up to get it soon and, inevitably, get distracted and forget. We're all fallible beings – that can happen. My solution, my nudge? *Benchers* everywhere I could possibly eat. By my desk, by the couch in the living room, all over the kitchen and dining room – everywhere possible. When I'm always in reach of a *bencher* I can't not remember to *bentsch*.

It is our *haftarah* that shows us the secret bettering ourselves. That secret, as Yehoyada realized, was the nudge – and each of us has the opportunity to follow his lead and enrich our religious lives in simple, practical, and yet incredible ways. This coming week look at what you could nudge, to better yourself as a Jew.