

## The Quality of Charity

In this week's Torah portion, *Ki Tavo*, we read about the commandment of *bikkurim* -- offering God the first fruit of the harvest:

You shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest... [and] put it in a basket... The priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God... [You shall say:] "I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O Lord have given me." You shall then leave it... and bow low before the Lord your God... And you shall enjoy, together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst, all the bounty that the Lord your God has bestowed upon you and your household. [Deuteronomy 26:2-11]

The priests divided the fruit among themselves, to be eaten later, and gave back the ornate and expensive baskets to their owners.

Likewise, animal sacrifices had to be the best animals that we possessed, those without any blemishes. For example, the Torah states:

Your [sacrificial] lamb shall be without blemish. [Ex. 12:5]

With the bread, you shall present, as burnt offerings to the Lord, seven yearling lambs without blemish. [Lev. 23:18]

Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish. [Num. 19:2]

The Book of Proverbs teaches:

Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the best of all that you produce. [Proverbs 3:9]

However, later, the prophets were quite critical of donations to God and sacrifices, because they saw that while people discharged their ritual obligations, they did not pay heed to the ethical commandments. God says through the prophet Amos:

If you offer Me burnt offerings... I will not accept them. Spare Me the sound of your hymns... But let justice well up like water, righteousness like a mighty stream. [Amos 5:22-24]

And through the prophet Hosea:

כִּי תִסַּד חֲפָצָתִי וְלֹא-זִבְחָה וְנִדְעַת אֱלֹהִים מַעֲלֹת:

For I desire lovingkindness, not sacrifice; knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.

And the prophet Micah argues in a similar manner:

[The people ask:] With what shall I approach God, do homage to God on high? Shall I approach with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Would God be pleased with thousands of rams, with myriads of streams of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for my sins?

[God replies:] "You have been told, O man, what is good, and what God requires of you: Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God. Then your name will achieve wisdom." [Micah 6:6-9]

After the Romans destroyed the Temple, making sacrifices impossible, the traditional Jewish teaching was extended to say that all donations *for the sake of* God (not *to* God) should be of the best goods we possess.

Maimonides summarized it as follows: [Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Things Forbidden on the Altar 7:11]

Everything given for the sake of the Almighty should be of the most attractive and highest quality. If one builds a house of prayer, it should be more attractive than his own dwelling... Whenever one designates something for a holy purpose, he should sanctify the finest of his possessions; as the Torah states: "All of the choicest quality should be given to God." [Leviticus 3:16]

He even extended it to *all* charity, presumably on the grounds that giving to the poor is giving to God:

If he feeds a hungry person, he should feed him from the best and most tasty foods of his table. If he clothes one who is naked, he should clothe him with his attractive garments.

This is echoed in a summary of the Code of Jewish Law:

Anything you do for the sake of heaven should be the best and the most beautiful. [Kitzur Shulchan Arukh 34:5]

The Lubavitcher Rebbe extends that notion even further, to the order of studies in school and in activities that benefit the community:

The rule, "the choicest to God," applies in all areas of life. If the school day must include both sacred and secular studies, the former should be scheduled for the morning hours when the mind is at its freshest and most receptive. If one's talents are to be divided between two occupations, one whose primary function is to pay the bills and a second which benefits his fellow man, he should devote his keenest abilities to the latter.

In devoting the "first-ripened fruits" of his life to God, a person, in effect, is saying: "Here lies the focus of my existence. Quantitatively, this may represent but a small part of what I am and have; but the purpose of everything else I do and possess is to enable this percentile of spirit to rise above my matter-clogged life."

In the movie "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade", the hero has to choose, among the many kiddush cups in front of him, which one belonged

to Jesus. He concluded it had to be the simplest and least ornate one, a plain clay cup, on the grounds that he was poor. Wrong! Even poor observant Jews make sacrifices to buy ornate kiddush cups!

What should we think of these extensions? What if you don't give of the best? It's better than giving nothing. Charity is charity, no? Isn't it natural to want to save the best for yourself?

Here are some jokes that reflect this normal human attitude:

-A ship runs into a storm. A passenger prays: "God, if you let me survive, I pledge to donate \$10,000 to charity." The storm abates. The man then says: "On second thought, why don't I give only \$5,000 to charity." Immediately the storm begins raging again in full force. The man then looks up to the sky and says: "Hey, couldn't you tell I was only joking?"

-A farmer tells his wife: "One of our cows gave birth to twins. Let's offer one of them to the Lord. When we sell it, we'll give the proceeds to charity." A few months later he goes to his wife, looking very sad, and tells her: "The Lord's calf died."

-A man is desperately looking for a parking space. He prays: "God, if you get me a parking space, I will be more observant, I will give \$5,000 to charity, I will... Oh, wait, never mind! I found one."

What are the implications of the Sages' injunction to donate only the best you own? If I upgrade one of my possessions (car, appliance, furniture) and give the old one to charity, is that bad? Suppose a destitute refugee family moves in my neighborhood. They need a car. I give them mine and buy a new car for myself. The Sages say I should have given them the new car. Is that going too far? Should I, instead, to follow the letter of the injunction, sell what I no longer need and donate the proceeds to charity, rather than giving away objects? Point to ponder...

Shabbat shalom.