

The Science and Spirituality of Generosity:

Giving and Receiving Joy and God's Presence

Science has proven that generosity is good for you. It will make you happy. When compared to spending on oneself, thinking about spending on others “triggered increased activity and connectivity in the temporoparietal junction and the ventral striatum – regions associated with reward, pleasure, and happiness.”¹ In fact, you don't need to give much. Small acts of generosity have significant effects. How you feel is not about how much you give, but how often you give. “You don't need to become a self-sacrificing martyr to feel happier,” said University of Zurich researcher Philippe Tobler. “Just being a little more generous will suffice.”² Judaism knew this long ago. Generosity leads to joy.

In our materialistic world, we think of generosity, *nedivut* in Hebrew, as referring only to money. However, we can be generous with our time, our kindness, our love, our energy, or our possessions.

To be truly generous, and truly happy, we must give not out of obligation (*tzedaka*), but with a willing heart (*terumah*). Our tradition calls this *nedivut halev* – a generosity of the heart – and tells us that it is our nature to be open hearted. Caring comes easily – when our hearts are open. When our hearts are closed, we experience a spiritual malady known as *timtum halev*, a barricaded heart. Sometimes we ourselves choose to close our hearts, following our ego and our ‘evil inclination.’ Sometimes our hearts are closed as we defend ourselves from our life experience. “When our hearts are closed, we are the first among those who suffer from that closure....With a walled-off heart, our lives will be so much less than they could be.”³ Rebbe Nachman calls this state a “heart of stone.”⁴ To cure this malady, he proscribes frequent and spontaneous acts of kindness.

This remedy works because, in the words of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, “External motions stimulate internal ones.”⁵ For as a different spiritual teacher said, “Our heart follows our deeds.”⁶

There are endless forces, internal and external, which try to stop us from acting on our generous heart. Thus, to give only when we are genuinely inspired only strengthens the forces that barricade our heart.

¹ THE WEEK, July 28, 2017, 19.

² Ibid.

³ Morinis, Alan, *Everyday Holiness*, Boston: Trumpeter, 2008, 153.

⁴ *Likutei Moharan* 2, 15:1.

⁵ *The Path of the Just*, an early eighteenth century mussar text.

⁶ *Sefer HaChinuch*, written in medieval Spain by an unknown author.

Maimonides, always the scientist, knew this a millennium ago. He commented on *Pirkei Avot* 3:15 writing, “the virtues of character do not come to a person through the greatness of their deeds but according to the number of deeds. Virtues of character come with repetition of right action many times over.”

“Our external actions bring about inner change. Each act of generosity works to pry open the heart a little, like clearing a blocked stream one pebble at a time.”⁷ Or in modern scientific terms, our actions quite literally rewire our brains, creating new neural pathways, and changing who we are.

The *midrash* teaches, “When a person gives even a small coin, she is privileged to sense God’s presence. Even the wicked who have no other virtue but the giving of *tzedakah* are deemed worthy to greet the Presence of God.”⁸

True generosity is not merely giving of your time or your money or your care. True generosity is giving of yourself. True generosity involves changing yourself, and that is how we connect with the Divine Presence.

⁷ Morinis, p.160-161.

⁸ *Midrash Tanchuma*.