

What If We Really Meant It?

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I wonder how different things would be if, instead of mailing in our tax forms, or filing them online, we had to come, like the ancient Israelite, to a public place of significance and make a public declaration. We might stand at the courthouse or the Capitol, or perhaps in front of the Liberty Bell or the Statue of Liberty.

Instead of saying, “*Arami Oved Avi*,” my father was a wandering Aramean, we might say, “My ancestors were wandering refugees. Oppressed and persecuted for their religious faith, they came here to escape pogroms, conscription and poverty.”

Just as the ancient Israelites in their declaration acknowledged the promises that had been fulfilled, we too might speak of the ways that we have been blessed in America. Finally, the ancient declaration concluded with a statement: “I have cleared out the consecrated portion [the tenth of the crops to be brought to the Temple] and I have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, just as You commanded me.” What might we say about our scrupulousness in making our called-upon tax contribution and our recognition that it will help to pave our roads, light our streets, educate our children, provide the fire fighters to protect our homes, and deliver our mail.

Not every American would make the same declaration. Not everyone came here; some lived here before the Age of Exploration. Not everyone’s life was bettered;

some were torn from lives that were freer and culturally richer before being stolen into bondage. The Jewish community has found a haven in America, but for some the promise of America has not yet been fulfilled; “with liberty and justice for all” remains more aspirational. But what a difference it would make if instead of seeing taxes as theft of personal property, we recognized them as a repayment of the good we have experienced and a contribution toward the commons from which each of us receives a benefit.

In his D’var Torah, Charlie talked about how, in the Jewish view, a celebration that did not also include support for those in need was not a real celebration.

We see that in our customs relating to the holidays. On Purim we distribute *Matanot La’evyonim*, gifts to the poor, and before Passover, *Maot Chitim*, funds to help families with the special Passover supplies. When someone dies, instead of flowers, we make a contribution to a charity that had meaning to them. With the approaching High Holy Days we will be reminded that repentance in our hearts must be accompanied by deeds: *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah*, and *Tzedakah*—repentance, prayer, and charity—are our obligations at this time of year. The basic theme—“*ivdu et Adonai b’simchah*,” serve God with joy—was understood to mean not just our own joy and that of our families, but the joy that we bring to others.

There is a joke circulating about how everyone wants to serve God, but in an advisory capacity. We all have ideas of what God really should be doing. But the Torah portion this week reminds us that we serve God when we serve our

neighbor, when we respect that image of God that is present in each person, whatever their status.

There is a debate about the ritual described in Charlie's portion. Is the really important thing the declaration that the Israelite makes? We might think so, as it was exactly these words that were later chosen as the core of the Passover seder. "My father was a wandering Aramean . . . went down to Egypt and dwelt there. . . . And the Egyptians dealt harshly with us . . . and we cried out to the Eternal, God of our ancestors." Or was it the bringing of the first fruits with the contribution of the tithe? Clearly the words are very important; they have shaped Jewish identity through the centuries. Yet the portion concludes: "AND DO THEM." That is, with regard to all these commandments, as Pirke Avot teaches, *lo hamidrash ha'ikar, eleh hamaaseh*, it is not the explanation that is critical but rather the deed.

Charlie, the work that you and your dad have done with your own hands, and the example that your entire family sets for our community, make me confident that you will go on, to learn and to do, to continue to share with others, and to understand the significance of that sharing.