

Donation Nation

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The auditorium was packed with a diverse group of young men and women, whose rapt attention was focused on the speaker at the podium, a 93 year old former professor of pediatrics named Ruth Gottesman. With one short sentence, she changed the trajectory of the lives of everyone in the room. “I am happy to announce that, as of August of this year, the Albert Einstein College of Medicine will be tuition free.” Upon hearing this, over 100 students jumped out of their seats, screaming, crying and hugging each other. Without the burden of close to \$200,000 of debt, they could choose medical specialties they found fulfilling, rather than lucrative. This was the result of a gift of \$1 billion left by Dr. Gottesman, itself the product of a portfolio of Berkshire Hathaway stock left to her by her husband of 72 years, the investor and philanthropist David “Sandy” Gottesman. Upon his passing, he attached the simple instructions that she should do “what she thinks is right” with it. It is the third largest gift ever bestowed upon an institution of higher learning, made even more remarkable by the seeming lack of fanfare and gestures of honor that usually come with such a donation. For example, Dr. Gottesman has eschewed naming rights for the school, a privilege that is regularly

¹ Prepared in partnership with Rabbi Shaanan Gelman

purchased with a much smaller donation. In fact, a condition of the gift was that the name *not* be changed! Perhaps she is satisfied with surpassing the *other* Dr. Ruth in fame... In an interview, she explained why she insisted on forgoing naming rights: "We've [already] got the gosh darn name — we've got Albert Einstein."²

How fortuitous it is that this story broke during the *parhiyot* in which we recall the generosity of the Jewish people in donating to the Mishkan, as well as the reading of Parshat Shekalim, which discusses the head tax levied on the Jewish people. Rashi notes, though, that the first reference to the biggest players in the donation process, the נשיאים, is somewhat deficient. The Torah does not spell it with the letter י:

Shemot 35:27

והנשאים הביאו את אבני הששה ואת אבני המלאים לאפוד ולחשו:

And the chieftains brought lapis lazuli and other stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece.

רש"י שמות פרשת ויקהל פרק לה

(כז) והנשאים הביאו - אמר ר' נתן מה ראו נשיאים להתנדב בחנוכת המזבח בתחלה, ובמלאכת המשכן לא התנדבו

בתחלה, אלא כך אמרו נשיאים יתנדבו צבור מה שמתנדבין, ומה שמחסירים אנו משלימין אותו. כיון שהשלימו צבור

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/26/nyregion/albert-einstein-college-medicine-bronx-donation.html>

את הכל, שנאמר (שמות לו ז) והמלאכה היתה דים, אמרו נשיאים מה עלינו לעשות, הביאו את אבני השהם וגו', לכך התנדבו בחנוכת המזבח תחלה. ולפי שנתעצלו מתחלה נחסרה אות משמם והנשאם כתיב:

Noting this linguistic anomaly, Rashi employs the Midrash to construct a rich backstory behind this missing letter. The *nesi'im* were the first to donate to the inauguration of the altar, but they had previously dilly-dallied when it came to the construction of the *mishkan*. When the donations far exceeded their expectations, all that was left were the stones of the *ephod*, the apron of the Kohen, and for the breastplate. For this, they were “punished,” so to speak, their lack of initiative forever immortalized with an awkward spelling.

Rashi's approach raises a basic question: What is actually wrong with the *nesi'im*'s original approach? They were prepared to take on the lion's share of the initial burden, serving as a financial backstop so the Mishkan would never be wanting. How many institutions would *love* to have donors like this? They shouldn't lose a letter, they should be honored at a gala dinner! Rav Bernard Weinberger, in his work *Shemen HaTov*, refines the question even further. Why did Rashi have to supply this backstory altogether? All we need to know is that the letter ך is missing on account of their initial delay. Why is it important to tell us about their alacrity later on, when dedicating the altar? Which leads us to one final question: if they *were* so zealous the next time around, wouldn't that have atoned for their initial erroneous strategy?

Rav Weinberger suggested that there is an important idea to be learned here, one applicable in several realms of human endeavor. If you pass up an opportunity at a fortuitous time, it will never return, regardless of what you do afterward. Consider Reuven, who repented from his suggestion to throw Yosef into the pit, but still lost his birthright as a result- because he could have saved him at the time. Those precious moments that we squander with impetuosity, foolishness, excuses, insensitivity or inattention can never be recovered, despite our proactivity the next day. The backstory, therefore, becomes critical. It is true that the *nesi'im* donated the most expensive and, perhaps, the most crucial component of the garb of the Kohen Gadol, but they could never recover from their hesitation in the original moment. The loss of a *she'at hakosher*, of an opportune moment, is permanent. The tragedy of the *nesi'im* isn't their failure to correct course- it is, rather, the harsh lesson of the way we react in the moment.

There is one other area where *sh'at hakosher* is applicable, one that keeps me up at night: geopolitics. I don't have to tell you how hostile and treacherous the world has become toward Jews in the last several years, and even more so in the last five months. The cover article of April's issue of Atlantic magazine, by Franklin Foer, is titled, "The

Golden Age For American Jews Is Ending.³” The subtitle is, “Anti-Semitism on the right and the left threatens to bring to a close an unprecedented period of safety and prosperity for Jewish Americans—and demolish the liberal order they helped establish.” Everywhere the Jews have ever lived, they’ve experienced prosperity, alongside deep enmity and antisemitism. Certainly, American Jews encountered the same thing, but for a while, it seemed like the tides had turned. Jews were (and are) a fixture in boardrooms and operating rooms, on the trading floor and on the silver screen. We were accepted everywhere, to the degree that the concern was not anti-Semitism, but intermarriage. In fact, by the mid 1990’s, scholars had declared the issue of anti-Semitism in the United States to be largely dead. The historian Leonard Dinnerstein, a preeminent scholar of anti-Semitism, concluded his masterful work *Anti-Semitism in America* with the postscript that the discipline to which he had devoted his life’s study “has declined in potency and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.⁴” But to assume that this will last forever is to be willfully ignorant of Jewish history. Everywhere the Jews have lived aside from Israel has been temporary, coming with an expiration date. A thousand years of uninterrupted and vibrant Jewish life in Germany came to an end in the span of a decade; three thousand years of Jewish existence in Iraq largely ended between 1948-1951. 564,000 Hungarian Jews were

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https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/04/us-anti-semitism-jewish-american-safety/677469/?gift=Bslz3SaU-WrvK7AleLpEbXQtG4hBejmdfha_V4S2lyc&utm_source=copy-link&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=share&fbclid=IwAR39lfqkyg3Jet1kC2diREXxC9rzs89Fh9MTexAIS4-H-FwWbTtVLLpsiYw

⁴ Ibid

exterminated between April 1944-February 1945. In all of these places, there were those who knew when to leave...and those who didn't. The history books abound with the stories of Rabbis who encouraged their flocks to remain in Poland and Hungary, leading to the destruction of entire communities. And throughout Europe, anyone who sounded the alarm- and there were many such people- was written off as crazy or alarmist, often until it was too late. Those who had deeply assimilated assumed that their fundamentally secular nature rendered them immune from Anti-Semitism, which targeted the outmoded, uneducated, unrefined religious Jews. To quote the article from the Atlantic,

In 1933, the Central Union of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith published a 1,060-page book meticulously enumerating the achievements of the community. It was quite a list. Weimar Germany is remembered as a period of instability, a time of beer-hall-putschists, louche cabarets, and rampant assassinations. But Weimar was also the pinnacle of Jewish power, a golden age in its own right, especially if one considers the whole of German culture, which sprawled across borders on the map. During the first decades of the 20th century, Jewish contributors to German music included Gustav Mahler, Kurt Weill, and Arnold Schoenberg; to German literature, Franz Kafka, Stefan Zweig, and Walter Benjamin; to science, Albert Einstein. Jews presided over the Frankfurt School of social criticism and populated the Bauhaus school of art and architecture. The Central Union's compendium could be read as the immodest self-congratulation of a people

*who represented 0.8 percent of the total population — or as a desperate, futile plea for Germany to return the love that Jews felt for the country*⁵.

The secularized German Jews thought that their outstanding contributions to German society, culture and learning would save them- but we know what happened. America of today is not the same as Germany in the 1930s. Fundamentally, the government still prosecutes anti-Semitism, even if it is increasingly rampant- at least for now. When is the *sh'at kosher* for us in America? We don't know; It could be the blink of an eye, something as small as the letter ך.

In a world of darkness filled with newly realized uncertainty, we may feel paralyzed, unprepared to make drastic decisions, and unwilling to let our decisions be small, either. There seems little we can do to change the world around us, and what people think of us. But Shlomo HaMelech tells us that there is one thing that can change our fate⁶:

לֹא-יִוָּעִילוּ אוֹצְרוֹת רָשָׁע וְצַדִּיקָה תַּצִּיל מִמָּוֶת:

Ill-gotten wealth is of no avail,

But charity saves from death.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Mishlei 10:2

Yes, *tzedakah*, the very subject of the donations of the *nesi'im*. Maybe we can't change the *whole* world,, but charity changes *our* world- internally and that around us. In linking charity with death, Shlomo was instilling this mitzvah with a sense of urgency. Think about how much money was raised on October 8th, how much gear was purchased, how much food was donated. Maybe it wasn't all done so professionally or in the most organized way, but it was done with heart and a sense of the importance of the moment. That moment, that *sh'at hakosher*, was an exception. People usually wait to give, whether because they are procrastinating or because they want to see what others are giving. This can be laudable, if the giving of others spurs them to give more in turn. Often, though, charitable campaigns end up scrambling at the last minute due to everyone's hesitancy. It's true for every worthwhile charitable institution, locally and nationally, though of course I'll speak about our own campaigns here. The Mishloach Manot campaign is currently at 35% participation, but could be doing so much better. It's true for the Purim Seudah, which always ends up getting sold out, but often at the last minute. It's true for the Matanot Le'evyonim campaign, which always does well- on Purim itself. It may end up being true for the upcoming campaign Jimmy announced last week to burn the mortgage. It doesn't have to be like this, though. *Baruch Hashem*, just about every campaign we run ends up doing well in the end. We are a generous community and we extend ourselves, but what if we gave at the *sh'at hakosher*, the

propitious moment at the beginning? That moment of inspiration is fleeting, but it is also transformative- and may not return.

Let us learn the lesson of the *nesi'im*, and let us learn to seize the moment that may never return again. May God grant us the ability to gain much clarity and to give much charity- at the right time.