

YK AM 5774

Jewish tradition is filled with innumerable questions that have no definitive answer. Why do we break a glass at the end of a wedding ceremony? Why do we place pebbles on top of a gravestone? Who divided the Torah into all the separate portions? Jewish trivia. The fate of the free world does not rest upon the answers, but they would be interesting to know. Alas, when a civilization last five thousand years, a good deal of information escapes along the way.

There are however, other questions for which we have no answer, but that are big questions. Questions over which rabbis and scholars and Jewish philosophers have struggled for centuries. How could nothing exist before creation? If God created the universe, who created God? These are interesting questions, big ones, but not necessarily questions that have consequence in our day to day lives.

And there are still other questions, also big ones, and important ones, important because if we can discover the answer, maybe that answer will have a consequence in our lives. Here is what I believe to be one such question. Why did God give us the Torah?

Several weeks ago, the sanctuary was full as we said goodbye to a lifelong, beloved member. Arthur Brody was a pillar of Temple B'nai Abraham. His father Leo was president in the mid-50s and again in the mid-60s. Arthur was one of the most active of Federation activists, the causes he supported and led were innumerable, he was a philanthropist and an intellectual and a businessman and one of those people who leave a mark of almost superhuman proportion. It is impossible to count the number causes in the Jewish community and the community at large that are so much the better because of him.

When I speak at a funeral, I try to speak last. I do this deliberately. If there are other speakers, and they cover ground I intended to cover, I can try to adjust my own remarks. Therefore, in the early afternoon of July 30, I sat in my seat as I listened to a number of speakers, which included two of Arthur's grandsons.

As is inevitably the case when grandchildren eulogize grandparents, they thanked Arthur for his love, for his support, and for all that he had taught them, both by his words and by example. In particular, the grandsons praised the grandfather for having taught them what it means "to give back."

When I rose to speak, almost without thinking, I uttered a few spontaneous words. Happily, Jane, Arthur's wife, agreed with them. They want something like this. "Guys, I don't think I have ever heckled before at a funeral, but I need to correct something you both said. And I think your grandfather would agree. Perhaps the lesson you may have learned was to give back. But I am pretty sure the lesson your grandfather intended to teach was not to give back...but to give."

I probably spoke more strongly than I should have, but I couldn't help it. The expression "giving back" bothers me. It is about the most un-Jewish phrase I can imagine.

In the Talmud we read a good deal about Rabbi Eleazar. It is important to know that all of these rabbis we read about from that time, Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Yosi and so on, none of them were, shall we say, professional rabbis. That was a concept that would not come to be for some centuries. They worked at different things; grain broker, silversmith, sandal maker. Some were quite prosperous. Some were in need.

Rabbi Eleazar was one of the prosperous ones. Rabbi Simeon bar Abba was often in need. “The tale is told. Rabbi Eleazar dropped a dinar. Rabbi Simeon bar Abba picked it up and handed it to him. Rabbi Eleazar said, ‘I have already lost possession of it.’

“The sages said, Rabbi Eleazar had no purpose for dropping the dinar than to convey possession of it to Rabbi Simeon bar Abba, who was a poor man.”

Let’s think this through. Eleazar had plenty. Simeon bar Abba had little. Eleazar wished to lighten Simeon bar Abba’s burden. He chose to do so in a way that, at least technically, did not involve him giving alms to Simeon bar Abba, but rather have Simeon bar Abba profit from finding lost property. Convuluted? Absolutely. But with a point. There is always a point.

Another tale of Rabbi Eleazar. He was the legal custodian of some charitable funds, and those who sought it would come to his household. “Once Rabbi Eleazar came home and asked the members of his household, ‘what deed of charity have you done today?’ They answered, ‘A company of people came here. We gave them food and drink and they offered prayers on your behalf.’ Rabbi Eleazar said, ‘that is not the proper response.’

“The next day he came home, and again asked, ‘what deed of charity have you done today?’ They answered, ‘a company of people came here. We gave them food and drink, and they cursed you!’ ‘That,’ he said, ‘is a proper response.’

Rabbi Eleazar went out of this way to give charity. Rabbi Eleazar went out of his way not to gain anything, even a word of thanks, by it.

And by the way, we really should stop talking about charity. As this holiest day of the year, we should use the Hebrew word Jews use: tzedakah. And the nature of this day is not the only reason for that. Charity and tzedakah are not the same thing.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines charity as “benevolence or generosity toward individuals or humanity.” American Heritage has no definition of tzedakah. But here is one from the Entzeeclopedya Hatalmudit, the Hebrew Talmudic Encyclopedia: tzedakah – religiously obligated charity. It is a mitzvah! And let us remember that the definition of mitzvah is not good deed; it is commandment.

Giving back. The phrase is everywhere. Put “giving back” into Google. Know what happens? Links to a fund or two or a site or two about philanthropy. But something else jumps out at you right away:

MacDonald’s – Giving back is an essential part of the way we operate

BP – Pleased to support our communities by giving back

Budweiser – gives back to communities across the United States

And Mercedes even sponsors a magazine called Giving Back, with ads for upcoming galas.

See a pattern? Okay. This is kind of fun. Now all of these are right and appropriate and good. And honest. However, companies like this do not make these contributions out of altruism. They do so because it is good business. They do this because they believe residents of a particular community are more likely to patronize that business if those residents perceive that the business helps their schools, their libraries, and their parks. Companies do this because it is an appropriate and useful way to show gratitude for that business.

Whatever motivates it, this is giving. It works out well for everyone. There's just one thing. It's not Jewish giving. And on Yom Kippur, it is Jewish giving that concerns us.

It is impossible to talk about Jewish giving in this place without mentioning a most extraordinary giver, the philanthropist Eric Ross. When he died two years ago I wrote about him in the Star Ledger. The article began with this.

“When I read in the newspaper a few weeks ago that some American billionaires were trying to convince their peers to join them and commit to leaving half their wealth to charity, I chuckled. Not because their effort was not worth it. Rather because I already knew someone who had been following that principle — and more — for a long time. His name was Eric Ross.”

Eric, after whom this Sanctuary is named, was an interesting person. He was not always easy. He was the first to admit he could be curt and unpleasant. But he was an extraordinary man. He arrived from Germany a penniless uneducated refugee who spoke no English. But without ever borrowing money he built an enormous business, sold it in his sixties, and turned his attention from running a company to overseeing investments. He became very, very wealthy. All along the way, he lived, shall we say, within his means. He lived modestly. His ranch house in South Orange was comfortable, to be sure, but no one could ever accuse him of being lavish.

And what is interesting about that is that he could have lived lavishly, and what is more interesting is that perhaps he should have. He deserved to. If there was ever anyone who was a self-made man, it was him. And he not only owed nobody nothing, but given the opening hand fate dealt him in life, he had all sorts of strikes against him from the start. He owed the world nothing, but he gave tzedakah like he

owed the world everything. During his life, and after his life, he essentially gave everything away.

Where does that kind of behavior come from? Eric had an answer, and in typical Eric style it was simple, straightforward and clear. "I am a Jew," he said. "That's what you're supposed to do."

That's what you're supposed to do.

What aggravates me about this phrase giving back, is that there is an implied contract. Spelled out, it might sound like this.

Since I have prospered, since life has been generous with me, since things have gone well, I will share some of my money, some of my time, some of my energy, with those who are less fortunate. Now that really doesn't sound so bad. But let's hear what the Talmud has to say.

*Every person is obligated to give charity according to his potential, even a poor man who derives his livelihood from charity. Even if he is able to give only a small amount, he should not hold himself back, because the small amount he gives is equivalent to a large amount given by a rich man. There is no difference whether one gives a lot or a little, so long as one directs one's heart to one's Father in Heaven.*

Judaism is clear. The commandment is for all. And the commandment is not to give back. The commandment is to give. But why is that distinction so important? We return to where we began, to why God gave us the Torah.

Let's set the scene. Moses is atop Mount Sinai, the motley Israelites at the base. Egypt is 50 days in the past. After slavery and plagues and the parting of the sea and way too much matza...this is all new and kind of crazy. God gives the Moses the Torah. With this book the Israelites

will be able to remain alive and together in the desert, they will be able to enter the Promised Land, they will be able to establish a language and a culture and a religion and a community; they will be able to establish a civilization that will last for five thousand years, outlasting...everyone

For the Israelites, this is an incredible deal! I have only one question. What does God get out of it?

Yes, the Israelites have to fulfill their part of the covenant. They must offer certain things at certain times and obey many commandments and do their best to follow the path God lays out.

But still. What does God get out of it? Whatever the Israelites do, whatever their end of the contract involves, does it genuinely bring some benefit to God? Do the offerings make God happier? Do the sacrifices give Him some kind of Divine nutrition. Does our fine behavior on earth put a smile on his face in heaven?

Of course not. God might have preferences to be sure, but if He is whom our tradition says he is, then the notion that something we could do would enhance or enrich him in some fashion is preposterous. Which leads us to an inescapable conclusion: Why did God give us the Torah? Because he could. Because he knew it would enrich our lives, He knew it would guide and sustain us, he knew it would lead us long into the future.

God gave us the Torah *because* there was not a single benefit to be had by him. It was the ultimate Jewish gift. The kind toward which we should aspire.

When we read the shtetl-filled stories of Shalom Aleichem, the Wise Men of Chelm and his other tales, they are filled with stories of people giving to one another. I have nothing to eat but you can share my

nothing with me. Come to my house for Shabbat, our crust of bread is yours, our morsel of potato is yours, you can bless our stub of a candle, find a piece of floor on which to rest.

When we read those stories, we automatically imagine ourselves as those characters, the ones who open wide and give and share no matter how little there is to give and share. It is the kind of lovely, romantically nostalgic sort of Yiddishy story that warms our hearts.

If I were there then, that's who I would be. Well we are here now. And that is still who we should be. And who we want to be. The kind of person who gives and gives and gives. The kind of person who understands that the meaning of giving is solely, solely, to help someone else, improve a situation, feed a hunger, slake a thirst, heal a wound, fill a hole, bridge a gap. It is about the gift. It is not about the giver.

On Rosh Hashanah I asked, this year, about what will we be not silent? On Yom Kippur, the question is different. What will I give, which I have not given before? Can any of us honestly say, there is not more that we could give? That we cannot find a few more dollars in our wallet? Or an additional hour or two in our week? To give for no reason other than to give? To do what a Jew does?

A final piece of rabbinic lore.

A sad but touching piece of Jewish tradition teaches that the greatest mitzvah in which one can engage is to bury a loved one, to participate in the placing of earth into the grave. Why is that so great a mitzvah? Because it is one of which there is no possibility of repayment.

As today we look deep into our souls, with a candor we can escape on other days, let us resolve to give as our tradition would like us to give, gifts of the heart and the soul, gifts of the wallet and the watch, gifts

that are given solely for the joy of bettering another, gifts that are given with not a thought of return.

O God on this solemn Day of Atonement, help us this year be who we want to be...for that is the gift we most want. Amen.