

Generous Hearts

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A parable attributed to Rabbi Haim of Romshishok, heaven and hell share an identical, if unusual, quality. In both realms, people are forced to eat with long, unwieldy spoons. The difference, however, arises in what comes next. In hell, people refuse to cooperate, and consequently everyone starves. In heaven, people generously feed one another across the table, and thus everyone is well nourished. Heaven is filled with generosity and cooperation, its opposite place, with greed and ego.

Generosity. It is such a simple thing, and it can be so hard. In the busy-ness of our lives, taking a generous approach needs to be made with intention. as this story exemplifies, generosity can literally save lives. It also is counter to some of the current trends in the world around us, and generosity is deeply, profoundly Jewish.

When the Israelites stood at Sinai and received Divine instruction to build the *mishkan*, the tabernacle. Moses tells the people “take from among you gifts to God, כָּל נָדִיב לִבּוֹ, everyone whose heart is so moved.”¹ When used in this construction, “nativ lev,” literally voluntary heart, generous heart, it reflects an understanding that the heart is the source of our motivation.² Generosity of heart is not only about things, it is a spiritual mindset that compels us to openness, kindness, and a demonstration of concern for others.

¹ Ex. 32:5.

² *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, comment on Ex. 32:5.

“This is how we begin to make room for the divine presence in our midst,” too suggests Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld.³ How beautiful it is to acknowledge that when we are generous we also expand the potential for God’s presence, however we might imagine it; Higher Power, our Parent/Ruler, the Force of the universe, or the God we might not be sure of, the mystery, to dwell among us.

Generosity comes to us naturally. According to Dr. Summer Allen in their paper, “The Science of Generosity”, it is entirely possible that “generosity may be an evolutionary adaptation that has helped promote the survival” of several species, including our own.⁴ Another example of the innate idea of human generosity is in studies of young children, even toddlers demonstrate a drive to cooperate and help others. The difficult part is that as children grow older, giving behavior becomes “more selective and nuanced.”⁵ And generosity is also good for older adults’ health, too. Studies show that giving social support, “time, effort, or goods,” is associated with better health and volunteering is associated with delayed mortality.⁶

Today, Rosh Hashanah, is also known as *Yom haDin*, the day of judgment. One of the liturgical moments that atune us to our true selves, to the potential for this new year, is the Unetaneh Tokef. This prayer that we will recite tomorrow morning and again on Yom Kippur demonstrates the potential for us to use our generous hearts to change

³ <https://hebrewcollege.edu/blog/generosity-of-heart/>

⁴ Allen, Summer. (2018). The science of generosity. Greater good science center. https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/GGSC-JTF_White_Paper-Generosity-FINAL.pdf

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

ourselves, and maybe even change our world. The prayer concludes with a reminder, “*u’tshuva, u’tfilah, u’tzedakah ma’avirin et ro’ah ha’gzeyrah*” repentance - tshuvah, prayer - t’filah, and tzedakah - generous acts from a generous heart have the power to change the character of our lives.⁷

We need to be *nadiv lev*-generous of heart in at least two ways. Generous with our resources and generous with our spirit.

Our greatest resources are our time, our willingness to serve, our learnings, our kindness, creativity, and brain power, and our dollars. Each of these are understandings of tzedakah - righteous acts, or justice, or charity. Tzedakah though, at its essence, in addition to being a mitzvah - a sacred obligation - are the opportunities we take upon ourselves to ensure our community and its people can thrive. Mitzvot like tzedakah enable us to connect with other people, with our best selves, and with God. There are so many places throughout our city and country, including Temple Beth Shalom that need you and your generous heart.

This year may we also be generous with our spirit. As we find our footing and the new normal after two years of pandemic reality, a generosity of spirit is a willingness to presume good will from others. It is demonstrated by an attempt to suspend judgment and accusation in the face of perceived slight and insult and maintain an open heart. As Rabbi Ben Greenberg noted, “this sounds simple but it takes a lot of intentional work to

⁷ Translation from Rabbi Richard N. Levy, z”l.

cultivate within the context of community.”⁸ As a sacred congregation, it is incumbent upon each one of us to continue to exercise the muscles of our generous spirits.

Because, notes Rabbi Greenberg, “when we create synagogues bursting and overflowing with generous spirits we will have developed powerful models of a world redeemed amidst the world that is. Communities that demonstrate trust, respect, and slowness to judge each person within that community present a picture of a humanity the way we should be all the time everywhere.”

How fortunate we are to have Temple Beth Shalom, a sacred community with hundreds of people who demonstrate *nadiv lev* - a generous heart. Where, even when it is challenging, we cultivate trust, and work hand-in-hand to ensure our congregation and our Austin Jewish community continue to thrive. In this new year may each of us do our very best to ensure that everyone receives food from the hands of their neighbor just like the vision of heaven. May our generosity of resources and our generosity of spirit continue to expand in this new year. And may it be a happy, healthy, and sweet year for us, for our community, and for the world. *Ken y’hi ratzon*.

⁸ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/2013/05/10/generosity-of-spirit/>