

Re'eh
August 14, 2015

Yesterday morning I visited the toddlers in my daughter's day care center. It was professions week - they had visited the Post Office, done science experiments with a scientist, and met real live firefighters!

And then they had me.

Even though I AM an excellent story book reader and I did bring some really cool artifacts like a tallit, tefillin, and kippot, I wasn't sure how I would measure up.

They listened (mostly) patiently while I read "Ima on the Bimah" and were (somewhat skeptically) interested in trying on the Jewish ritual objects that I brought.

Then I took out the tzedakah box and asked if anyone wanted to give tzedakah - and it was nearly pandemonium! They. Were. So. Excited! It didn't matter (or they didn't notice) that I had, just seconds before, dumped out the tzedakah box in order to pass around the coins. And it didn't matter that most of them only had a penny in their hands. They were jittery with excitement in the way that only little kids can get. Arms flapping, tushes bounces, hands open wide for me to give them a penny...for them to give to tzedakah.

When did we lose this excitement over giving tzedakah?

And before you tell me, "when giving tzedakah meant giving our OWN money instead of the rabbi's", I will tell you that not a single kid wanted to keep the coin I gave them.

Growing up, the rule in my house was that 10% of our allowance had to go to tzedakah. Even though it would have been easier for my mom to hand me a dollar bill each week, I got my \$1 allowance in coins so that I would have a dime to put in the tzedakah box.

Somewhere along the way, that changed too.

In the sixth aliyah of this week's parsha, Re'eh, we are commanded to give tzedakah. In fact, we are told, promised even, that there will always be poor in the land, but we should open our hands WIDE to our brothers, the poor and the

needy. We are commanded to neither harden our hearts nor shut our hands - rather, we must open our hands wide and lend him what he needs. The Torah even pre-empts the excuses that we might make and tell us to do it anyway.

There are many commandments that we do with joy - celebrating Shabbat and holidays, Torah study,

Then there are the commandments that we easily ignore because they feel minor or somehow irrelevant to us / who we are / where & when we live.

And then there are commandments like this one - the commandments that we do but don't do joyfully.

Reb Mendl of Rimonov says this lack of joy is why we don't make a bracha over giving tzedakah. He says we only say brachot when we are filled with joy and most people give tzedakah only half-heartedly or even with some amount of resentment in their hearts.

But the Rashba, a Medieval Spanish rabbi, has a different answer. He says that we only make brachot on mitzvot that we do by ourselves (lighting the Shabbat candles, sitting in the sukkah, etc). If the completion of the mitzvah requires another person, then there is no bracha. The mitzvah of tzedakah requires two people, the giver and the recipient.

You know the joy you feel when you help someone else out? The feeling when you have something to share that the other person needs - time, food, money, or expertise. Even if you start the encounter a bit begrudgingly, the act of giving usually ends up making you feel Really Good.

That's the same feeling that giving tzedakah is supposed to give you. I think the reason it doesn't is that sometimes I forget that there is another person on the other side of the encounter. When the CJP pledge card comes in, it's easy to see the envelope and ignore the people that the envelope represents.

As we enter the month of Elul, a month of introspection leading up to Rosh Hashanah and as the donation cards begin to fill our mailboxes, I aim to remember the people on the other end of the envelopes - and to give joyfully.

Shabbat Shalom and Chodesh Tov.