

Shana Tova.

A young boy reluctantly trudged home from school one day. His family lived on the outskirts of town, in a run-down house on the other side of the tracks.

He wasn't eager to see his mother that afternoon. Earlier, his teacher had given the class an assignment: each student was to bring in canned goods to donate to the food pantry. Knowing how bare his own family's cupboards were, he didn't think his mother would be too happy to reduce their provisions even further. Surely, the boy thought, his family had nothing to give; not only did he not want to return to school empty-handed the next day, he wanted to spare his mother the embarrassment of needing to tell him "no." So he kicked some stones down the dirt road, stalling the inevitable.

Finally, he reached his home and reluctantly told his mother about the assignment. To his surprise, she eagerly got up and filled a bag with canned goods to share. "Mom," the boy said, "WE get food from the food pantry. We have so little, how are you giving it away?"

"Honey," she replied, "we're never too poor to be generous."

---

Think for a moment: with which person do you identify: the boy, or his mother?

**<PAUSE>** In normal times, we would all like to say that - no matter the

circumstances - we are like the mother: kind, patient, and generous, even when we have little.

But in this moment, in 2020, I would argue that we are more like the boy: we are poor, and we are having trouble finding anything more to give. I am not saying we lack food; rather, we are poor in other crucial aspects: we are impoverished of patience; destitute of generosity; strapped for compassion. In so many ways, we are tapped out and fear that we have nothing left to give. We have spent so much energy merely adjusting to “The New Normal” - which is so very abnormal - that we find it hard to think of others. It is so much harder to muster empathy when we can barely handle our own problems.

And make no mistake: *everyone* has something new to manage. Parents are struggling to balance our children’s safety and education, not to mention their emotional well-being. Those who are unemployed or under-employed have spent sleepless nights wondering when financial relief might arrive. For the elderly or immuno-compromised and their loved ones, every cough, sneeze, or drippy nose feels like a matter of life or death. And those who build their community outside of their homes are suddenly finding that no doors are open to them.

We are at capacity. The idea of giving even a little bit more keeps us up at night, wondering where we’ll find the strength. At first, many of us stoically rose to the challenge of “flattening the curve”; but now, months later, we find that our reserves are depleted. Our spirits need renewing, yet there is no way to recharge; there is no break from a pandemic, no vacation, no quick getaway.

This year, our daily interactions - with our family, with our synagogue community, on social media - will be different; consequently, our attitudes toward others will likewise be changed. How can we take a lesson from the mother in the story? We know that we must never be too exhausted, too compassion-fatigued, too broke of spirit to be generous. We must develop coping mechanisms to ensure that we do not cease caring about ourselves or others.

We will fail at this - I guarantee it. We will fail *a lot*. And when that happens, we must apologize and try again. And *do better*.

We are a community in mourning; but in this case, the entire world grieves with us. We are experiencing a profound and complex sense of grief; however, unlike after the loss of a loved one, our community cannot help us shoulder our burden. The nature of this situation is that we all mourn together, yet completely alone.

---

I first conceived of this sermon pre-pandemic (because generosity is never out of style). That version was particularly focused on financial generosity. While Jews have always prioritized tzedakah, I worry that the less we rely on the generosity of others, the more easily we forget how important it is to give.

Many of us grew up watching our parents give tzedakah in the form of cash, checks, or food. Seeing their generosity created our giving habits, just as theirs

were formed by their parents' actions. I have distinct memories of the two baskets that sat on my parents' desks: one held bills to be paid, and the other contained any donation requests they received. The bills were paid weekly; the tzedakah requests, monthly. I recall sitting with my father on weekend mornings when I was just 3 or 4 and "paying the bills" together: he wrote checks, and I wrote the numbers 1-10 on a post-it note.

In this case, the mere act of participating in the ritual of giving helped normalize and ingrain the concept for me from a young age. Watching my parents write checks not only for goods and services but also for important causes instilled in me the importance of sharing what we had. And no matter how tight money was at the moment, the tzedakah requests were never thrown out. The second basket - the pile of requests - might have gotten larger or smaller, but it was never ignored.

---

That model of giving is one that we desperately need right now.

We, as a society and as individuals, are under tremendous pressure. This will likely be the most disruptive school year today's students have ever known, and God-willing, will ever know. The next two months may be the ugliest political cycle we've ever witnessed. And this fall and winter are predicted to be among the deadliest few months our country has ever seen.

To make it through, we will need to summon all of our reserves of generosity. We will have to continually remind ourselves that our lives are interconnected and that we depend on one another. In particular, in these unprecedented times, we need a model of generosity that is transparent, teachable, and accomplishable.

So what could such a paradigm look like?

The Torah distinguishes between two types of generosity. The first is “the giving that comes because your heart is so moved that without even the flicker of a thought your hand rushes to dig into your pocket to give.” This is called *t’rumah*, which means “gift.” Alan Morinis, the author of *Everyday Holiness*, says that this type of giving “comes neither from obligation nor rational thought nor guilt, but out of an irresistible feeling that stirs deep within. It’s a movement of the soul and it generates an open-handed response.”<sup>1</sup>

The second model is *tzedakah*, or obligated giving. We give *tzedakah* because we are commanded to and committed to, regardless of whether or not our heart is moved at that moment. The word “*tzedakah*” comes from the root “*Tzedek*,” meaning “righteousness”, “justice”, or “fairness.” We are obligated to use the resources we have to make the world a more just place.

In moments of clarity or spiritual connectedness, we are really quite good at *t’rumah* - at giving gifts of our heart. In the Torah, we see this with the collection of donations for building the tabernacle. In modernity, we see this in the way we

---

<sup>1</sup> *Everyday Holiness*, Alan Morinis, page 150

rally around people and causes that touch us. When the pandemic hit in March and it became clear that many of our beloved institutions needed our financial support or they would close, we jumped into action. Schools, camps, and synagogues were saved because we felt an emotional connection to them and gave from our hearts.

But for some of us, the long slog of this pandemic has hindered our ability to be spontaneously generous. When our capacity is maxed out from merely getting through the day, we have no room left for giving gifts of our hearts.

Perhaps in this moment, tzedakah - obligated giving for the sake of righteousness - is the model we need. A good example of this comes from the Torah, which teaches us that farmers had multiple obligations. First, they needed to leave the corners of their fields unharvested, so that the poor could come take what they required to feed their families. Second, they were obligated to give a portion of their harvest to the kohanim, the high priests; then another portion to the Levi'im; and every three years, they had to give one-tenth of the remaining harvest to the poor. That final custom translated into "tithing," or "giving one-tenth," which led to a well-known (if not well-followed) practice of giving away 1/10th of one's earnings.

If ever there was a season when our fellow human beings needed us to share our finances, our energy, and our possessions in order to offer a safety net to our community, this is it. By fulfilling our obligation to provide for the most vulnerable members of our society, we not only meet God's expectation of us, we raise up

our fellow human beings. I will remind us all: in this season of need, please remember to dig a little deeper and give a little more - surely someone needs it, and we're never too poor to be generous.

But tithing does not have to only be financial. What would our house be like if we summoned just 10% more patience for our loved ones? Could we get 10% less annoyed at the coworker who has unmuted themselves on Zoom for the umpteenth time? If we shift our priorities just a little, we could spend 10% less time zoning out in front of a screen, and instead use that time to write letters to prisoners, send postcards to voters, or call a lonely member of our community.

The Torah encourages us to leave the corners of our field unpicked, so others may take what they need. Could we leave 10% of our time unscheduled, to let others tell us what they need from us? This small change could give us the opportunity to rise to the occasion and truly make a difference in someone's life.

---

A few minutes ago, I spoke about our capacity being maxed out due to the challenges of the pandemic. I could feel some of you nodding along, perhaps quietly saying to yourself, "That's me!" But that may not be you; depending on life stage and circumstances, people are experiencing this moment very differently.

Friends, the truth of the matter is that some of us are not maxed out right now. Yes, most of us are stressed - likely more so than we have ever been - but some of

us can still give more. Perhaps the slower pace of life has offered you opportunities to do things you've always wanted to do, or the time at home has helped rejuvenate or cultivate relationships. If so, your model for generosity could be that of *terumah*, of a gift. Yes, you are still obligated to give *tzedakah*, but the way you can add light into our world is by giving generously on top of that. Lift a neighbor's spirits - and ease their burden - by bringing them dinner. Visit (physically distant and masked!) someone who lives alone and would appreciate the company. Drop flowers off at a friend's house just because you were thinking of them.

But if your capacity truly is tapped out, take your cue from the model of tithing. The Torah tells us how much to give and to whom, removing the heavy load of decision-making and allowing us to simply say, "This is necessary, and it is good." 10% of our income might feel like a lot - and it is! And we should still strive to reach it! But 10% of our energy - 10% of our time - 10% of our compassion - might just be accomplishable.

Jewish law says that even a person who *receives* charity is obligated to *give* *tzedakah*, because no one should be denied the joy that comes with performing the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*. Like the mother in our story, no one is too poor to share - even if you're overwhelmed, struggling, and in need of a lift from others, you still have something to give that can help a fellow human being.



The harsh reality of this pandemic has opened our eyes to many troubles that are an everyday reality for so many: disparities in healthcare, inequities of working conditions, issues in our education system. Generosity begins when we can open our eyes to the conditions that already exist, and start doing what we can to alleviate them. Whether that means giving money to a cause or being more forgiving toward someone, by digging deep into our wells of generosity, we can give others the cushion that they need to make it through another day - and perhaps help them to realize that they, too, have the capacity to share.

This is not easy work. I am asking you to add to your burden at a time when you are carrying a heavier load than ever before. But if we can do this, then when we look back on this time we will remember the collective spirit of generosity and unity, rather than the discordance and struggle.

The Mishnah, in tractate Peah, teaches that these are some of the things for which there are no fixed measure: how much of the corner of the field we leave for the poor; acts of kindness; and the study of Torah<sup>2</sup>. You cannot do too many acts of kindness or to give too much to the poor.

Later today, you might find yourself sitting down to a meal with your family. It may have fewer place settings than in years past, but you will still have time to speak with loved ones. Please allow me to encourage you to make generosity a topic at your meal. As you sit with the members of your household, do a little mental math: just how close are you to the ideal of giving 10%? Not just a tenth of

---

<sup>2</sup> mishnah Peah 1:1

your income, but also of your time, of your patience, of your love? Is it possible that you could give just a little more? Identify people that need more of your attention or a spontaneous gift of your heart, and think about whether you can make their struggle just a bit lighter

This holiday season, let us all make the pledge to give more; to help more; and to be more compassionate.

Shana tova.