

“Giving from the Heart, Giving from the Mind”

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I have often taught b’nai mitzvah students to distinguish between charity and tzedakah. Both are wonderful, I would tell them. Both are righteous acts. And yet they are slightly different from one another.

Charity is *caritas*, giving from the heart. It is often spontaneous. We are moved by a PSA on television or by a disturbing article online about suffering somewhere in the world. Or we are filled with wonder by the work of an NGO or a medical research organization. We click the donate button and give some money to the cause. Lickety-split, we have become charitable contributors, and for at least a fleeting moment we feel great about what we have done.

Tzedakah comes not from spontaneity, but from obligation. We take upon ourselves the so-called yoke of Torah, which in this specific sense means a duty to right injustice by contributing obligatory amounts of our wealth to the common good. The corner of the field, the tithe, the half-shekel, the Passover wheat allotment to the poor – all are traditional formulations of the general idea of tzedakah. “Tzedek,” “justice,” the righting of social imbalance or the preemptive avoidance of imbalance.

I always told the kids that charity *should* be given, and that tzedakah *must* be given. When our hearts don’t move us, we must nonetheless give tzedakah. It is a bill we owe, and that the Torah tells us we must pay. Otherwise, the social structure goes out of whack. It becomes “unjustified.”

Our portion, in one of its less obviously inspiring sections, talks about giving a *sh'lamim* offering. The old JPS translated it as “peace offering.” The new JPS more accurately calls it a “sacrifice of well-being.” The offering must be *tamim*, we are told. That is, it cannot have a *mum*, a blemish. No broken bones or lame legs. No blindness. The offering must be perfect. After all, one is giving it to God, as it were.

It seems that the Torah has two things in mind when it calls for a *sh'lamim*. One is a *neder*, and one is a *n'davah*. JPS calls a *neder* a “vow.” It translates *n'davah* as “free will offering.”

What's the difference? Thanks to the help of Ramban, I can suggest that it's something like my pedagogic distinction between charity and tzedakah.

A *neder*, or “vow” if you will, is made in a time of wonder or distress. It is spontaneous. It emerges from a place of neediness, maybe even a place of fear. Jacob offers a *neder* when he promises his loyalty to God in exchange for being delivered safely to his relatives in Haran and back home again. The sailors on Jonah's boat offer a *neder* in exchange for God's agreeing to stop the incipient shipwreck. The verb the Torah associates with giving a *neder* is *l'hafli*, literally, to express wonder.

A *n'davah*, by contrast, comes in the normal course of events. One gives a freewill offering as a way of marking important moments in life, or as a way of paying one's annual obligations to the social weal.

In modern terms, a *neder* might be like that immediate contribution we make when the PSA on TV makes us cry – or cry out. A *n'davah* is like our annual gift to the UJA-Federation. The Federation gift goes to fund local social welfare

operations, startup Jewish organizations, social services in Israel, Joint Distribution Committee operations throughout the former Soviet Union and South America, and so forth. It funds the backbone of Jewish communal life, including our support for the needy of all peoples the world over.

One kind of giving gives us more of a rush. The other gives us more of a sense of rectitude, of duty fulfilled. They are very different sensations.

Which is more important? The Torah seems to think that they are equally important, and equally necessary. It tells us that contrary to what we might think, the spontaneous *neder* must be every bit as perfect, every bit as unmaimed and unblemished, as the more rationally given *n'davah*. Just because it represents a burst of emotion doesn't mean it can be compromised.

Likewise, our parashah tells us that both the *eZRACH*, i.e., the citizen of the Israelite people, and the *ger*, the resident alien among you, are allowed to make *n'darim* and *n'davot* – in fact encouraged to do so - and both are expected to maintain the same quality control over their offerings.

What's my take-away? For one, I would like to politely counter the trend among our American Jewish brothers and sisters toward the spontaneous – the so-called “meaningful” gift – and away from the sober “obligatory” tax-like giving that held our communities together for decades. Surely we can do both. We are smart people, both intellectually and emotionally. I'm positive that we can hold two ideas in our heads – and our hearts – at the same time.

Finally, I would want us to try not to resist the Torah's call for maximum effort in our giving. “Good enough” should not be considered good enough when we are giving, even when it is spontaneous. Yes, all gifts of time and/or money are

inherently generous. But they are not without *mumim*, blemishes, if we have not reached deep into our resources to go beyond the rush of good feeling and toward what is truly needed.

Only when our giving, whether of the moment or in fulfillment of our lifelong social contract, is worthy in its own right can we dare to hope for *sh'leymut*, wholeness, for ourselves and our needy world. Only then can we align ourselves with the sensation ascribed to God's very self in our morning blessings: Blessed are You, Holy One of Being, *mafli la'asot*, who acts from a place of wonder and gratitude.