Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Terumah |

Can You Give From the Heart ?

Was the donation a demand or a show of heart?

In preparation for the construction of the *Mishkan*, Hashem told Moshe to tell klal Yisrael, "let them take for Me a portion, from every man whose heart motivates him you shall take My portion." Expounding on this verse, commentators attempt to discern what kind of donation the Yidden were obligated to give. On the one hand, Hashem commanded every Yid to give. On the other, the terumah was meant to be a gift from the heart. Was this a donation of choice or not?

While there are many ways to explain this seeming ambiguous command, we will focus on one that offers a profound message in regards to relationships: What Hashem needed first and foremost from every Jew was his heart.

When an individual who's on the receiving end gets what he wants or needs from someone who's giving it with heart, the gift means the world to him. It becomes something he wants to take. On the contrary, when the other party is giving begrudgingly, it won't appeal to him anymore. He loses the appreciation for what he's getting.

I often hear spouses say, "I wanted this or that so much, but when he or she finally gave it to me I didn't want it anymore." How did that happen? "Because I saw they didn't want to give it to me." No one wants to feel like a beggar. As much as it's nice to get something from someone we love, if it's not coming with heart and willingness it loses its charm.

This was what Hashem was telling klal Yisrael. Yes, I want a donation from you, but it only appeals to Me if you want to give it.

It's interesting to see that it's not what we get but how it's given that makes all the difference. Very often, it's not the gift or favor that touches the heart because the recipient could have probably gotten it on their own, but what they were really looking that means so much to them is what lies underneath: the heart.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu says to us, "Give, My child, your heart to Me." More than the gold and silver and copper, this is what Hashem wants from us most of all. If you care about your relationship with your spouse, give with feeling. Even if you're not connected to the feeling of love, try to arouse it in your heart or at least speak and conduct yourself in a way that portrays the connection you want. Without this basis for your giving, you're not really giving at all. When you're giving with feeling, you're giving something big: the feeling. The actual object or favor is only symbolic of your

love. The true love is the actual heart, which is more important than anything.

As with many such ideas, when I share this concept with people, they often say, "Oh! I wish my spouse would know this. How different things would be if they would hear this from you," but our work is to look inside ourselves and see how we're doing this as opposed to wondering how others can be doing so for us, how much we're giving with an expression of affection and appreciation that will make the gift valuable. In most cases, we're giving anyway.

We don't even realize how much we're giving as spouses—whether the wife is preparing food and clean clothes for her husband or the husband is bringing in *parnassah* or giving a hand at home, etc. If the way we do it isn't with heart, we could drain ourselves from giving but that's not the message the other party is getting, which is why they may often keep demanding more. Once we're doing it anyway, we may as well do it right. And when we give right, we generally end up having to give less because what we give achieves its intended purpose.

What Lies Beneath the Surface?

Sometimes, an individual may demand something that seems too difficult to give. The spouse's response might be, "You're asking for too much. I can't do this." In most cases, that's not true. For example, your wife might ask you to go out together once a week and you can't see how that will be possible. But if you acknowledge what lies beneath the request, a simple call for more connection, honing in on that in a way that you could will give her what she's really asking for.

Since behind the technical request is a cry for the spouse's heart, there can surely be a way to substitute what they're asking for with something else that will convey this emotion. "I really want to give you this. If it doesn't work out, is there something I can give you instead?"

Even when we can't fulfill a request, or even fill in a substitute for it, simply expressing how much we would love to do it may be enough. It's the feeling above all else that our spouse is seeking and if the feeling is real it'll come across even when we can't give. All Hashem asked for in *parshas Terumah* is for klal Yisrael to give their heart.

Sometimes, we get our ideas of what we want from marriage by looking outside of our space. We see something a sister or brother or friend is getting and we want it too. There's something about realizing that what we think we see someone getting is not necessarily what they are getting. I've seen this time and again in my work with couples. In one case, for example, I was familiar with a couple where the wife was begging for a vacation. The husband ended up acquiescing, but he didn't really want to go and it ended up being a disaster for both. The neighbor, however, watching from the exterior, was sitting home and wishing she could have that too. This is not always the reality, but when giving comes without the heart, the recipient doesn't feel like they're getting anything anyway.

Instead of being jealous of what we think others are getting, we should focus on the meaningful things we have in our own lives and see how we can be happy with the feeling behind it, to find our spouse's heart in the little things. When he gives with feeling, even when the husband has to say, "I wish we could go on vacation. I hope to take you when things aren't so tight," the wife may feel more at peace and taken care of than the one who did take the trip in the end.

On the Requesting End

While receiving something that was given with heart gives us the pleasurable feeling we yearn for in a relationship, there are times when we have to make a request, as well. Knowing how to make that a request is actually another important component in a healthy marriage because it gives the one who's asking an opportunity to exercise their vulnerability and the one who's being asked gets a chance to feel needed. But this only happens when what we're asking for is something the giver can do willingly. When we're asking for something that's hard for them, that we know it too challenging for them to carry

out at the present time, we're inadvertently putting them in a spot, a spot that might cause undue resentment.

When we consider our requests in advance to determine that they're realistic and possible for the other person to carry out, and we then allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough to ask for it, we're enabling the relationship to deepen. By asking for what we need we're opening the lines of communication instead of keeping our spouse in the dark, playing a perpetual guessing game of codes and hints. What does Hashem do? He isn't vague in what He wants from us. He first specifies that He wants donations from the heart and then proceeds to tell us exactly what the donations should be: gold, silver, copper, etc. The fact that you want to give me something doesn't mean that I have to wait for you to figure out what it is that I want. Of course, it's always nice to get a surprise gift or favor, but that doesn't discount the importance of asking for what we need when we need it.

The Understanding Parent

In the same vein, when a child makes a request from a parent, what lies beneath the surface is the same call: I want your heart. I want you to look at me. I want you to notice me, to look out for me, to express your love. They may not be smart enough to realize that this is what they're subconsciously asking for and it may appear that they're only asking for that game or toy because they saw it at a friend's house, but when we give a child that feeling that even if we can't give him what he's asking for we're here for him and want what's best for him, we're giving him what he's really asking for. As parents, we do so much for children. If we're anyway doing it, we may as well cash in on the opportunity to build our connection through our deeds. Children should never be made to feel that what their parents are doing for them is a burden. Instead, they should get the message that "I'm so happy I'm doing this for you. It means so much for me to see you happy." There are so many ways to give to a child in a way that leaves him feeling good.

If our main focus as parents is to be there for our children, to give them our heart, even when we can't fulfill their requests, they'll walk away feeling loved. Instead of "You're asking me again? Do you think you're the only child here?" By expressing that this child's happiness is our main concern, that we care about him deeply even when we can't give him what he's asking for, we're giving him the greatest gift of all.

One way to show our children that our heart is in our parenting is by buying them small gifts or treats even when they didn't ask for it. Especially after we couldn't fulfill a request, by coming home with an ice cream or keychain and saying, "I bought you this because I was thinking of you," we're conveying how much they mean to us. These small gifts are not as a means of compensation, only to express affection, to convey to the child that although I wasn't able to get you what you asked for, I care about you deeply.

-Q&A-

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question: Our son consistently misbehaved in class and was sent to the *menahel*, who punished him severely. He refuses to return to *cheder*. Should we force him to go back or allow him to stay home until he heals? To his credit, the *menahel* was ready to apologize when he realized that his punishment was not justified, but the only apology our son says he'll accept is a written vow that he'll never punish him again—for any offense. What are we to do?

Answer: Such situations must be dealt with case by case, but there are several general

pointers that we can cull from this painful scenario.

The first point is that whenever a child misbehaves on a consistent basis, we must do our duty to determine what's behind it. Is the child trying to provoke his parents or educators or is this a cry for help?

Secondly, when a child doesn't want to go to cheder, regardless of the reason, pushing or forcing him to go isn't healthy. We don't want him to go there by force and feel that we just want him out of the way. On the other hand, tolerating our kids staying home is not healthy either. If staying home turns into this enjoyable experience where they get a gourmet breakfast and lunch and loads of attention, we're only feeding it to their errant behavior. However, there's a way to not force a child to stay home yet still convey that this is not what the child should be doing. By making the circumstances slightly uncomfortable, such as telling the child, "I don't make meals during the day. You could have some cereal and milk," or, "You can't ride the bike outside until all the children come home, but if you want to stay home you could stay home." Almost always, the child will want to return to school from their own volition. It's less about forcing the child to go and more about bringing him to want to go on his own.

Regarding a child demanding an apology from an adult, the matter is certainly uncomfortable but when an adult hurts another person, including a child, in a way that's not justified, there's nothing wrong with asking *mechila*. How it's done and when it's done is tricky but being in a position of authority in no way exonerates the *menahel* of expressing regret.

Giving the child a note that he will never be punished again isn't appropriate either because it means there's no leverage—the child won't listen to the rules, but, as we discussed above, there's a way to tell a child that although his technical request can't be fulfilled, he could get what he's really asking for: the *menahel's* sincere apology. To that end the parent could say to his child, "I understand that you want to get that note and maybe you even deserve it, but I don't think it's possible. But, the *menahel* really is sorry and he's ready to do something else for you. He's ready to [for example] have a long talk with you or give you a paper that he won't punish you without first discussing it with your Totty." The main message the child needs to hear is that he could feel safe in the school environment despite what previously occurred. There are things that can be done in order for him to get that feeling that aren't as extreme or impossible as the note he's requesting.

We don't want to put a child in a position where he feels that he's the boss because he was hurt, but we do want to take him seriously. When he feels that he's being understood that alone will be enough to console him. The whole reason he was seeking negative attention in the first place is because he may have felt that he wasn't taken seriously. When parents acknowledge such a child's pain, he will be okay, with the help of Hashem.

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