



The Receiving Giver: On the Chain of Giving and Receiving

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*When God packed up and left the country, He left the Torah
with the Jews. They have been looking for Him ever since,
shouting, “Hey, you forgot something, you forgot,”
and other people think shouting is the prayer of the Jews.*

–Yehuda Amichai

in *Open Closed Open* (Harvest Books, 2006), translations by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld

Our *parashah* opens with a request that God makes of Benei Yisrael: “The Lord said to Moses: Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; from all whose hearts prompt them to give, you shall take my offering” (Shemot 25:11-12). Why does God need to make a request, what inspires this request and what is its essence?

The terumah, offering, may refer to the most significant gift that God ever gave to the people, the good doctrine, the ultimate take-away, the Torah.

A *midrash* in Shemot Rabbah expounds upon the verse that we just quoted, beginning its treatment by quoting Proverbs, “for I gave you good doctrine (take-away): do not forsake my Torah.” Connecting between this verse and the opening of our *parashah* is somewhat surprising, as there is no mention

here of a request made by God or of a contribution to God, but rather a mentioning of something that was given by God to Israel—namely the Torah. The two verses are connected through the verb “to take.” The Hebrew noun for doctrine is *lekah*, perhaps more literally translated as a “take-away.” God asks Israel “take for me” and the Torah is referred to as “a take-away.” By linking these two verses the *midrash* suggests that there is a connection between the offering that was taken from *Benei Yisrael* and the Torah that was given to them—taken by them.

Perhaps, making this connection between the offering requested in our *parashah* and the way the Torah is described in Proverbs, can help us resolve a textual difficulty found in the verse. The verse ends with the word “my offering” again connecting the taking and the offering, “you shall take my offering.” Beyond this, a closer look at the verse reveals that it consists of two parallel clauses that are almost identical to one another: “Take for me an offering... you shall take my offering.” This play on words raises the possibilities that the taking is either by Israel or from Israel, “Take for yourselves my offering to you” or “take from yourselves the offering that is for me.” The word “my offering” can thus be understood in two ways: in the sense of the offering brought by the people, those whose hearts prompt them, which will then become the property of God, or “my offering” in the sense of that which is already God’s, which is then given to people. This ambiguity, which yields the possibility that we are talking about God’s offering to the people, is what allows the *midrash* to say that the offering refers to the most significant gift that God ever gave to the people, the good doctrine, the ultimate take-away, the Torah.

The *midrash* highlights how special the Torah is by constructing another subtle play on words between “*lekah*” the take-away of the Torah and “*mekah*” the Rabbinic term for merchandise, which is used in the give and take of trade. The *midrash* contrasts the special spiritual quality of the Torah with the physical objects used in commerce. For example:

שמות רבה (וילנא) פרשת תרומה פרשה לג, א

'ויקחו לי תרומה' - הדא הוא דכתיב (= כמו שכתוב) (משלי ד) 'כי לקח טוב נתתי לכם תורתִי אל תעזובו', אל תעזובו את המקח שנתתי לכם, יש לך אדם שלוקח מקח יש בו זהב אין בו כסף, יש בו כסף אין בו זהב, אבל המקח שנתתי לכם יש בו כסף שנאמר (תהלים יב) 'אמרות ה' אמרות טהורות כסף צרוף', יש בו זהב שנאמר (תהלים יט) 'הנחמדים מזהב ומפז רב'.

Shemot Rabbah (Vilna) 33:1

“Take for me an offering”—This is as the verse says, “for I give you good doctrine: do not forsake my Torah.” Do not forsake the merchandise that I gave you. There is a person who has merchandise, if he has gold he doesn’t have silver, if he has silver he doesn’t have gold. But the merchandise that I gave you has silver, as it says “the statements of God are pure statements, purified silver” and it has gold as it says, “more dear than gold and great fine gold.”¹

The *midrash* explains that in contrast to other objects of value, such as silver and gold, which have either one characteristic or another, the Torah has both gold and silver, and by extension, everything else. And gold and silver aren’t just random examples, they appear in the following verse in our *parashah*. First, God asks for an offering and then details what it should consist of, “and this is the offering you should take from them—gold, silver, and copper” (Shemot 25:3). In this way the *midrash* constructs yet another connection between that which Israel is asked to contribute as an offering, silver and gold, and that which was given to them, the Torah, which, according to the *midrash*, contains silver and gold. Over and over the *midrash* emphasizes that God’s request of an offering, a *terumah*, comes on the background of the great gift that God already gave to Israel—the giving of the Torah.

The verb “to take” is what connects the verse from Parashat Terumah to the verse in Proverbs which describes the Torah: *tikhnu* and *lekah*. The verb “to take” is one that is used in several semantic realms, such as to indicate marriage. This semantic implication is evident

¹ A heartfelt thank you to Shmuel Herr for a *havruta* that sharpened and enlightened the *midrash*.

throughout the Torah, for example: “When a man has taken a new wife, he shall not go out with the army or be assigned to it for any purpose; he shall be exempt one year for the sake of his household, to give happiness to the woman he has taken” (Devarim 24:5). Similarly, the Midrash describes the relationship between Israel and the Torah as a marriage:

משל למלך שהיה לו בת יחידה בא אחד מן המלכים ונטלה ביקש לילך לו לארצו וליטול לאשתו
אמר לו בתי שנתתי לך יחידית היא, לפרוש ממנה איני יכול, לומר לך אל תטלה איני יכול לפי
שהיא אשתך אלא זו טובה עשה לי, שכל מקום שאתה הולך קיטון (=חדר) אחד עשה לי שאדור
אצלכם שאיני יכול להניח את בתי

It is analogous to a king who had an only daughter. One of the kings came and took her and wanted to take her to his land and to take her as his wife. He said to him: “This daughter that I have given to you is my only daughter, I can’t separate from her. I also can’t tell you not to take her because she is your wife. So do this favor for me, wherever you go make me a small room so that I can live with you, since I can not leave my daughter.”

The parable describes a father as being in a state of crisis due to the marriage of his daughter, devastated by the thought that his child is leaving him and will abandon him. The parable describes the reality that after the wedding, there isn’t necessarily a place for the father in the lives of his daughter and son-in-law. Even though if it weren’t for the father there would be no daughter, he finds himself without a role in her life. It is with this understanding that the father suggests a solution to this problem, he asks his son-in-law to enable him to continue to be close to his daughter. So even though this isn’t a strictly necessary arrangement from the perspective of the young couple, the father can’t imagine being separated and wants to remain close to his daughter. We don’t know what the daughter herself feels about this, but we do find out what this daughter represents, the Torah:

כך אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לישראל נתתי לכם את התורה לפרוש הימנה איני יכול, לומר לכם

אל תטלוה איני יכול אלא בכל מקום שאתם הולכים בית אחד עשו לי שאדור בתוכו.

So said the Holy Blessed One to Israel: I gave you the Torah, but I can't separate from it. Nor can I tell you not to take it! So wherever you go make me a house where I can live.

The explanation of the parable presents a picture of how anxious God feels after giving the Torah. Once the Torah is given, God feels obsolete. God has already revealed Godself, and given us His wisdom, what more does humanity need of God Himself?! True, God is the source of the Torah and the giver of the Torah, but it would seem, that since the Torah was indeed given, those who received her are no longer in need of a connection to her source—God.

This awareness and this understanding are the source of the divine request “for me an offering.” God needs a gift, a chamber among the people, because he gave the Torah, the good take-away. This notion holds in it an additional suggestion for the meaning of the verse at hand, a suggestion regarding the punctuation of the opening words. It hints at the following suggestion for reading the verse: “take”—the children of Israel take from me the Torah, and that is why it says “for me an offering”—I need an offering of a chamber in close proximity of the Torah, in close proximity to my daughter who was a take-away from me. In addition, it is possible that there is a third understanding presented here of the *terumah*, the offering that God gave people. According to this understanding, “my offering” refers not only to the offering that God gave, but also suggests that God himself is the offering, that God himself is given with the merchandise, with the Torah. As the *midrash* continues:

ויש לך מקח שמי שמכרו נמכר עמו? אמר הקב"ה לישראל: מכרתי לכם תורתי כביכול נמכרתי עמה
שנאמר 'ויקחו לי תרומה'.

And is there any [other] merchandise where the seller is sold with it?! The Holy

Blessed One said to Israel: “I have sold you my Torah, and it is as if I have been sold with it as it says, and you will take Me as an offering.”

One of the unique feature of the Torah as merchandise is that God, the merchant, is sold with it. One consequence of this for understanding the relationship between humanity and God is the claim that along with the gift of the Torah comes the gift of the relationship with the one who gives it. There is a three-part arrangement in this *midrash*, what is unique about the Torah is the fact that the father/seller remains a part of it. More than that, God gives some offering or good take-away to *Benei Yisrael* and this giving brings about a need, God becomes in need, which brings God to make the request of an offering. This offering will ultimately be the basis for a room for Him close to the Torah and close to Israel. We have, as it were, a kind of chain of need: The giving of the Torah creates a lack in God which inspires Him to ask of Israel, “take for me an offering... you shall take my offering.”

Any significant giving leaves the giver vulnerable to the possibility that after the close of the transaction, the relationship itself can be forgotten. The giver can be eclipsed by the object, by the relationship between the object and the recipient. The danger is that the giver will

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render themselves insignificant, once the receiver no longer needs them. God here is giving us one possible way of dealing with this danger, and that is to turn the tables by recognizing them and naming the need of the giver. By turning Himself into the one who then requests,

God engenders a cycle of giving.

We should all merit to significant and meaningful giving, giving that is powerful enough to make us vulnerable. And we should also find within ourselves, within this vulnerability, the strength and straightforwardness to follow this giving with bold requests, and to thereby build the strong bonds that only giving and receiving can create.