



It is Better to Give

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The Tisch: Ohev Yisrael #1

Gifts are more than their monetary equivalents. A gift can be an expression of love and affection, of fear and obedience, an obnoxious demonstration of wealth or a powerful equalizer of means. And gifts can also have legal power, beyond informal social ties. The best example of the legal efficacy of gifts in Jewish law is Kiddushin, betrothal. In the traditional heterosexual Jewish engagement ceremony that the Talmud imagines, the most common way of effecting the bond between the two parties is through the giving of a gift. A woman accepts a man's proposal and commits to marrying him through accepting a gift of betrothal. Massekhet Kiddushin, discusses the nature of this gift at length. What is the minimum value? What are the parameters of "in kind" types of gifts? Which exceptions to the standard type of gifts still work to create this legal bond?

Among the Talmud's list of exceptions to the standard betrothal gift model is one case where instead of the man being the one to give the gift to the woman, it is the woman who gives the man a gift instead. Generally, this role reversal would be ineffective and the betrothal would not be considered to have taken place. However, if the man is a person of great honor and influence, a person unaccustomed to receiving gifts and highly capable of bestowing them, then the dynamic shifts. If the woman gives this kind of man a gift and he deigns to receive it, they are betrothed. To have such a distinguished person receive your gift is considered to be



an honor. In this case, though the woman is the one who gives the material gift to the man, the honor is, as we say, “all hers” and the privilege of this interaction is considered valuable enough that the man and woman are betrothed. So though the money has gone from the woman to the man, the true value of the gift is considered to be from the man to the woman.

The Ohev Yisrael suggests that it is this mechanism which is at work when God asks human beings to give of our financial resources to build the Mishkan. God doesn’t have any need for gold, silver, wool and silk, so why is he demanding that we furnish Him a home with such luxurious fittings? The Ohev Yisrael explains that the reverse-gift Kiddushin is the model for what is really animating God’s request for these donations. It is an honor for us to be able to contribute to God’s home and God is being gracious by accepting our gifts. Our giving of these gifts is not about their materiality or the financial bottom line, but this giving increases the strength of our bond with God and formalizes our relationship. The true value of these contributions has nothing to do with the physical structure that they build, but inheres in their being the foundation of a home that we build with God together.

While I am not God, nor am I even some very distinguished person, this teaching resonates with me because it points to the complicated nature of gifts. The straightforward reading - that the gift benefits the recipient at the expense of the giver is often incorrect. This is not because of the adage that it is “better” to give than to receive, which assumes that we want to receive and are reluctant to give. It is because more often than not, the opposite is true. We like to be bestowers, because giving makes us feel good and generous and being on the receiving end makes us feel uncomfortable, makes us feel beholden, and may even make us feel vulnerable or powerless. The bestowing of gifts can often be weaponized and used as a way of manipulating others. The assumption of the Talmud in Kiddushin is in line with this, powerful people, men, give gifts. Powerless people, women, receive gifts. But sometimes, the roles can be reversed...



What the Ohev Yisrael teaches is that being willing to step into the receiving role, to be humble and accepting is itself a gift. When we allow people to feel needed by us, when we allow ourselves to be a little reliant, we make other people feel good, we make them feel important, and everyone needs to be the giver sometimes. When God allows us to build a house for Him, when He pretends to have needs that we can satisfy, He enables us to contribute, to feel proud and to feel accomplished. This kind of gift is subtle, but also critical and life-giving. We all need to feel that we matter and being able to give and to make a difference is critical to our being able to be in relationship with God and to be in relationship with one another.

Ohev Yisrael - Terumah	פרשת תרומה
<p>Or it will be said and they will take terumah to Me and Pseudo-Yonatan translated <i>they will take from before Me something set aside</i>. And one can see a hint in this along the lines of what is written in the Gemara in Kiddushin: A woman who says to a man “take this maneh and I will be betrothed to you” is betrothed. And the Gemara concludes that this applies specifically to an important man who does not ordinarily accept gifts from anyone.</p> <p>Consequently through the benefit that he [is willing to] accept from her it is as if <i>he</i> has given <i>her</i> the equivalent of a <i>perutah</i> and she is betrothed to him through this.</p> <p>And the language of betrothal, <i>kiddushin</i>, is known to be language of separation and setting aside...that is that the husband [to be] says to his wife, “you are betrothed” set</p>	<p>או יאמר ויקחו לי תרומה גו' ותרגם יב"ע ויסבון קדמי אפרשותא. יש לרמז בזה ע"פ דאי' בגמ' דקדושין. אשה שאמרה לאיש אחד הילך מנה ואתקדש אני לך הרי זו מקודשת. ומסיק הגמ' דדוקא באדם חשוב שאין דרכו לקבל מתנות משום אחד בעולם. אשר ע"כ בההיא הנאה שמקבל ממנה הוה כאלו נתן לה שוה פרוטה ומיקדשא ליה בזה עיי"ש.</p> <p>והנה לשון קידושין ידוע שהוא לשון הפרשה והבדלה ... והיינו שהבעל אומר לאשתו הרי את מקודשת.</p>



aside and separated from all other men, to be mine. And regarding the Holy Blessed One, blessed is His name, it is written **the silver is Mine, the gold is Mine**. And it is written **who preceded Me and I will pay**. And He doesn't need any donation, God forbid, to help Him and to support the building of the Mishkan. Therefore He commanded His holy people, children of the living God, to raise a contribution to God, the half *shekel*. And the principle of the matter is that the Holy Blessed One and Israel are one, in one connection and unification. And Israel is called part of a body and a "half" and through their giving the half *shekel* with a whole heart and according to the intention which we have explained then a complete unification is effected in the secret of One. And that is what is hinted at here **and they will take *terumah to Me*** that is the half *shekel*...

מופרשת ומובדלת מכל האנשים רק להיות לי והנה אצל הבורא ב"ה וב"ש כתיב לי הכסף ולי הזהב. וכתיב מי הקדימני ואשלם. והוא א"צ ח"ו לאיזה נדבה שיהיה לו לעזר ולסעד על בנין המשכן. ועכ"ז ציוה לעם קדושו בני אל חי להרים תרומת ה'. מחצית השקל. וכללן של הדברים הוא דקב"ה וישראל חד אינון בחיבורא ויחודא חדא. וישראל נק' בבחי' פלג גופא ומחצית וע"י נתינתם מחצית השקל בלב שלם וע"פ הכוונה אשר ביארנו שם נעשה יחוד שלם ברזא דאחד. וזהו מרומז כאן ויקחו לי תרומה. היינו מחצית השקל...