

The Talmud (Bava Batra 10a) tells a story about Rav Papa, a scholar in Babylonia in the 4th century CE, whose foot slipped while climbing a ladder. He almost fell; luckily, he didn't. His reaction was rather self-incriminating: "Am I liable for the same punishment as one who violates Shabbat or worships idols?" In other words, I just about fell to my death here, which is the same thing that happens to someone whose capital crime such as idolatry brings the punishment of *sekilah*, or what we call stoning. What terrible thing might I have done that I nearly suffered a fatal fall?

His colleague, Rabbi Hiyya bar Rav, of the town of Difti, suggested: "Perhaps a poor person once approached you for help, and you turned him away?" In other words, maybe you were given a glimpse of what you would deserve for being miserly?

This idea, that turning away a person in financial need is as grave a transgression as idolatry, is rooted in a commentary on this week's Torah portion, Re-eh. Rabbi Yehoshu'a ben Korhah explains: On the subject of financial need, the Torah says (Deuteronomy 15:9), "Beware that there not be a base thought in your heart" that with the sabbatical year approaching, when loans are forgiven, you might reject a needy borrower out of selfish motives. "If I'm not getting my money back, I'm not giving a loan." Earlier in the parsha, when the Torah discusses idolatry, it says (13:14), "Certain base men have gone out" and have pressured their neighbors to worship false gods. The common thread here is the word *bliya'al*, base. Just as in chapter 13, when base *ne'er-do-wells* are guilty of incitement to commit idolatry, so here, base thoughts—the thoughts that prevent us from helping those in need—are a form of idolatry.

Is that why Rav Papa nearly fell off a ladder to his death? Probably not, and frankly, the theology of sin and punishment, while a fascinating topic, isn't interesting to me here. What does grab me is the idea that the person of means who turns away the needy is put in the same base category as some of the most egregious offenders in Jewish thought. Is this hyperbole? Maybe. But there's power in the message, to be sure. When we have the capacity to help, and we choose to hold back for whatever self-serving reason, Jewish tradition considers this a serious misstep.

To be fair, we should affirm that the Bible's system of debt-forgiveness in the Sabbatical year isn't all that lender-friendly. The rabbis knew this, so there are two caveats to the system. The Mishnah in *Shevi'it*, the tractate about the Sabbatical year, says that when lenders tell borrowers they don't have to repay the loan, the borrower should pay it back anyway. And, the Rabbis instituted a loophole called a *Prozbol*, in which debt is transferred to the courts, who aren't exempt from loan repayment. It's an ancient version of FDIC insurance. That's because the rabbis didn't ignore the emotions involved in giving or lending. It's not easy to part with our well-earned resources, so it helps to have some confidence-building measures built into the system. And it's also natural for the giver to have feelings rooted in previous experiences. "Was my past generosity acknowledged and appreciated?" "Do I think my last gift was used wisely?" These are legitimate questions.

But we also can't ignore the power issues involved in giving and lending. Those with means, whether they like it or not, hold enormous power the moment they're asked to help. Yes or no, less or more—that's quite a bit of control over the financial well-being of another person. Anyone who's ever seen me being asked for *tzedakah*—usually in the middle of *minyan*—by someone representing an organization sees the power I hold merely by having a Discretionary Fund. I find that power, frankly, disquieting. No wonder the rabbis equated miserliness with idolatry, because in that moment, the holder of the checkbook is, in a way, playing God.

I feel compelled to address this issue this year on Parshat Re-eh, in our sixth month of coping with the pandemic and its difficult ramifications for community. The financial fallout from COVID-19 is obvious, and its ultimate consequences are still uncertain. Obviously, Jewish communal organizations are struggling to make ends meet, some more than others. Major legacy institutions have laid off or furloughed large portions of their staff. Jewish print media outlets, already part of an endangered species before Coronavirus, have shut down, going digital or just going away. And in the midst of all this, there are voices in the Jewish community that wonder if it's worth supporting traditional Jewish causes, even as institutions do their utmost to operate in nontraditional ways.

Rabbi Nicole Guzik, one of the rabbis at Sinai Temple in LA, recently addressed these rumblings in "An Open Letter to Jewish Parents About 'Opting Out'" in *Jewish Journal*. She underscores that those who are struggling financially need our help and understanding. But those who have means, but think that they aren't getting what they're paying for from communal Jewish life should not "take a break." Instead, they should double down. She writes: "Choosing to remain active in your synagogue, day school, religious school or camp community models for our children that when a family experiences a difficult time, we choose to hold one another's hands instead of fade away into the silence of resignation. A real community is one that upholds those who have fallen. A true community exists even when times are difficult and scary. A sincere community chooses to remain active when the world falls apart."

I think that Rabbi Guzik is spot on. Every Jewish professional I know who still has a job is working harder than ever, has had to learn new skills, and is feeling the same stresses as all those who rely on the organizations, shuls, and schools they serve. The last thing they, and we, need is for people to "opt out" because they've lost their Jewish routine. COVID has disrupted all routines, Jewish and otherwise, but the Jewish organizations I know are doing their best to navigate these unprecedented times. For that reason, I've tried in my personal giving, both from my own resources and from my Discretionary Fund, to continue my support of Jewish causes, and even to do a bit more than usual. It's not because I'm afraid of falling off a ladder. I want to avoid consciously any hints of selfishness, which as Rabbi Yehoshu'a ben Korhah taught, borders on avodah zarah, idolatry—the worship of the self, instead of God.

The same Talmudic passage with which I began continues with some teachings about the power of tzedakah, of righteous generosity. Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Yose, said it well: "All acts of charity and kindness that Jews perform in this world make great peace and are powerful intercessors between the Jewish People and our Father in Heaven." This is a small piece of the classic liturgical assertion in Unetaneh Tokef, that High Holy Day highlight. If we can give, now is the time to make great peace and to make an even greater impression on God.

Shabbat Shalom!