

The Joy of Giving

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What may a pauper do with his *matanot la'evyonim*?

As a rule, mitzvot of *chesed* bind the benefactor, not the recipient. We honor our parents by offering them food, but they choose whether to eat. We unload a burdened animal, but the owner decides what to do next.²⁹ We arrange jobs for the indigent, but this does not generate a special responsibility for them to rise on time in the morning and go to work.

One possible exception, though, is the mitzvah of *matanot la'evyonim*, giving money to the needy on Purim. According to Rabbi Meir, this mitzvah incorporates an unusual rule: The recipient is obligated to spend his gift for a Purim feast and nothing else. Rabbi Meir's point is cited in a discussion regarding proper use of a rented animal:

Rabbi Meir said that a renter who diverges from the owner's intent is called a thief. Where did Rabbi Meir say this? ...

Rabbi Meir said this regarding Purim collections, as we have learned, "Purim collections must be used for Purim. A city's collection must be used for that city. One may not evaluate [the need of recipients]; rather, we purchase calves, slaughter and eat them, and the remainder falls to the purse of tzedakah. Rabbi Eliezer said: The Purim collection must be used for Purim, and a pauper may not use it to purchase a shoelace unless this condition was stated before the city council; this was the view of Rabbi Yaakov, citing Rabbi Meir. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel was lenient."

However, Rabbi Meir's view in this matter may not be open to extrapolation to other laws. Perhaps Purim is unique, for the donor gave it only for Purim use; he did not intend it for any other use.

Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia 78a-b

רבי מאיר היא דאמר כל המעביר על דעת של בעל הבית נקרא גזול. הי רבי מאיר? ... הא רבי מאיר דמגבת פורים דתניא מגבת פורים לפורים מגבת העיר לאותה העיר ואין מדקדקין בדבר אבל לוקחין את העגלים ושוחטין ואוכלים אותן והמותר יפול לכיס של צדקה רבי אליעזר אומר מגבת פורים לפורים ואין העני רשאי ליקח מהן רצועה לסנדלו אלא אם כן התנה במעמד אנשי העיר דברי רבי יעקב שאמר משום רבי מאיר ורבן שמעון בן גמליאל מיקל דלמא התם נמי דאדעתא דפורים הוא דיהיב ליה אדעתא דמידי אחרינא לא יהיב ליה
בבא מציאה עה. - עה:

According to Rabbi Meir, a recipient may spend *matanot la'evyonim* only for a Purim feast. We do not follow Rabbi Meir's position in practice,³⁰ but how do we explain Rabbi Meir's dictum? What sort of *chesed* can so encumber its beneficiary?

The authors of the Tosafot were also struck by the unusual character of this *chesed*:³¹

²⁹ Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia 32a.

³⁰ See Tur, Orach Chaim 694 and Beit Yosef there, and Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 694:2. See also Shvut Yaakov 1:77.

You might challenge [these limitations on use of *matanot la'evyonim*] based on *Arachin 6b*, "One may divert *tzedakah* money for any purpose, even after the funds have come to the collector. Even if the donor said, 'This candelabra should be for the synagogue,' one may divert it for another *mitzvah*." Perhaps our law of not diverting funds, and of keeping a city's collection in that city, is unique to *Purim*.

וא"ת דאמרינן בערכין (ד' ו:) מעות של צדקה מותר לשנותן בכל מה שירצה ואפילו באו לידי גבאי ואפילו אמר מנורה זו לבד"ה מותר לשנותה למצוה אחרת וי"ל דדוקא בפורים אמרינן הכא דאין לשנות ומגבת העיר לאותה העיר נמי דפורים דוקא.

Neither the Talmud nor Tosafot explains Rabbi Meir's rationale, though. Why should we treat *Purim* differently?³²

Giving a meal gladdens the donor

Perhaps the respective foci of *chesed* and *matanot la'evyonim* are different. The purpose of *chesed* is to benefit the recipient, and our goals are determined by the recipient's needs and desires.³³ On the other hand, the goal of *matanot la'evyonim* is also to generate joy for the donor.

The Rambam testifies to this, in describing the importance of *matanot la'evyonim*:

It would be better for a person to increase his gifts to the needy than for him to increase his feast or the portions he sends to his friends, for there is no greater, more splendid joy than to gladden the heart of the needy, orphans, widows and foreigners, for one who gladdens the heart of the forlorn resembles the Shechinah, per Yeshayah 57:15, "To resuscitate the spirit of the lowly and to resuscitate the heart of the depressed."

Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megilah v'Chanukah 2:17

מוטב לאדם להרבות במתנות אביונים מלהרבות בסעודתו ובשלוח מנות לרעיו, שאין שם שמחה גדולה ומפוארה אלא לשמח לב עניים ויתומים ואלמנות וגרים, שהמשמח לב האמללים האלו דומה לשכינה שנאמר להחיות רוח שפלים ולהחיות לב נדכאים. הלכות מגילה והנוכה ב:יז

The Rambam here describes the benefactor's "splendid joy" in providing the cost of a person's meal. Admittedly, one could challenge this understanding and read these words as describing a disembodied, universal joy, or perhaps Divine *nachat ruach* generated by this generosity, but the Rambam's words in describing *Yom Tov* feasts betray his true intent:

Men eat meat and drink wine, for joy exists only in meat and joy exists only in wine. Also, when he eats and drinks he must feed the foreigner, the orphan and the widow, along with all of the other forlorn paupers. One who locks the doors of his yard

והאנשים אוכלין בשר ושותין יין שאין שמחה אלא בבשר ואין שמחה אלא ביין, וכשהוא אוכל ושותה חייב להאכיל לגר ליתום ואלמנה עם שאר

³¹ Tosafot *Megilah 78b Magevet*; and see, too, Talmud *Yerushalmi Megilah 1:4*

³² From an unabashedly homiletic perspective, one could note that the story of *Purim* revolves around cases of thwarted intent. From *Vashti's* defiance, to *Bigtan and Teresh's* plot, to *Haman's* donation and decree, to the gallows intended for *Mordechai*, to *Haman's* advice to *Achashverosh* regarding appropriate honors and rewards, every action perpetrated in *Megilat Esther* leads to an opposite reaction, and the only intent which is fulfilled is the intent of our Creator and Protector. As a lesson of the *megilah*, then, the pauper must recognize that *matanot la'evyonim* are presented to him with Divine intent, and are not to be diverted.

³³ See *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Matnot Aniyyim 7*.

and eats and drinks with his children and wife, and who does not give food and drink to the needy and those of bitter spirit, does not experience joy of a mitzvah but joy of his belly.

Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yom Tov 6:18

העניים האמללים, אבל מי שנועל
דלתות חצרו ואוכל ושותה הוא ובניו
ואשתו ואינו מאכיל ומשקה לעניים
ולמרי נפש אין זו שמחת מצוה אלא
שמחת כריסו.
הלכות יום טוב ו:יח

The joy experienced when providing a celebratory meal for others is categorically different from the joy generated by eating meat and wine with one's family; giving food to others alters the benefactor's own experience, introducing a unique brand of joy, the joy of a mitzvah. So, too, the "splendid joy" praised by the Rambam for Purim is the joy of the donor who has underwritten a Purim feast for a needy individual.

This is the joy which a donor is meant to experience, and wishes to experience, with *matanot la'evyonim*. We generally assume that a donor is comfortable with other uses of his donations,³⁴ but regarding *matanot la'evyonim* the Gemara asserts,³⁵ "He gave it for Purim; he did not intend it for any other use." Therefore, the recipient is bound to spend his gift for the feast of Purim and for no other benefit, however worthy.

On Purim, the donor's joy is the mitzvah

Taking this one step further, the *Aruch haShulchan* sees the donor's joy as inherent in the structure of the Purim mitzvot themselves, such that the benefactor does not fulfill the mitzvot of Purim unless he rejoices in his beneficence.

The *Aruch haShulchan* alludes to this in discussing Rabbi Meir's perspective on *matanot la'evyonim*:

Even though one may divert tzedakah in certain situations, here they enacted that it should not be diverted at all. The collectors should purchase meat with all of these funds, have the indigent eat as much as they wish, and let whatever remains fall to tzedakah.

Aruch haShulchan Orach Chaim 694:5

ואע"פ שרשאים לשנות לפעמים כמ"ש
ביו"ד בס"ר רנ"ט מ"מ בכאן היתה תקנה
שלא לשנות כלל ולוקחין בשר בעד כל
המעות ויאכלו העניים כמה שירצו ואם
יותר מהם יפלו לצדקה.
ערוך השולחן או"ח תרצד:ה

This requirement of satisfying donor intent is built into the actual rabbinic enactment of *matanot la'evyonim*, and is not simply an added frill. The *Aruch haShulchan* makes the connection to joy still more explicit regarding another mitzvah of Purim, though:

It is unclear whether one fulfills mishloach manot by sending portions to a distant friend before Purim, such that they arrive on Purim. Some say one does fulfill his obligation, but to me it seems that he does not fulfill his obligation. We require that portions be sent on Purim itself. Further, the

ויש להסתפק כששלח מנות לרעהו
שבמרחקים קודם פורים ויגיעו לו
בפורים את יצא בזה ידי משלוח מנות ויש
מי שאומר דיצא [באה"ט סק"ח בשם
י"א] ולי נראה דלא יצא דבעינן משלוח
מנות בפורים עצמו ועוד דהא עיקר

³⁴ Talmud Bavli, *Arachin* 6b.

³⁵ Talmud Bavli, *Bava Metzia* 78b, cited above in footnote 2.

essence of sending portions is to generate joy, and what joy does he experience now, if he sent the portions beforehand?
Aruch haShulchan Orach Chaim 695:17

המשלוח מנות הוי משום שמחה ואיזה
שמחה היא לו עתה מה ששלה מקודם.
ערוך השולחן או"ח תרצה:יז

According to the *Aruch haShulchan*, the mitzvah of sending *mishloach manot* is designed specifically to generate joy for the sender, as he applied a sender-centric philosophy to *matanot la'evyonim*. This is why the recipient must spend his donation in a certain way; the mitzvot of Purim are about creating joy for the benefactor.³⁶

Why do we care about the donor's joy?

One question remains, though: Why did our ancestors create Purim mitzvot which emphasize gladdening a donor? Some³⁷ note that Purim's social mitzvot respond to Haman's condemnation of the Jews as "scattered and lacking unity", but couldn't the architects of the holiday have met that need with recipient-centered philanthropy? Perhaps we may suggest a second benefit of these joyous mitzvah institutions.

We are taught³⁸ that Achashverosh created his feast to celebrate the apparent death of Jewish hopes for our return to Israel. Calculating that seventy years of Jewish exile had elapsed without any Divine redemption, the Persian king concluded that Daniel's prophesied redemption had failed, and we were doomed to be absorbed into his empire. The events of Purim hardly changed that gloomy forecast; despite our miraculous survival, we were still servants of Achashverosh, lacking permission to build the second Beit haMikdash and to escape our interregnum.

To combat this narrative, the Jews of the time³⁹ enacted a celebration which would catalyze redemption. The prophets of the end of the First Temple period had repeatedly warned that selfishness and greed would lead to exile, and Yeshayah had promised that generosity would be the key to our return, saying,⁴⁰ "Zion will be redeemed with justice, and her returnees with *tzedakah*." Thus, our ancestors celebrated Purim with deeds of generosity - and they emphasized the joy of the donor in order to promote this generosity among their neighbors and children. Performing righteousness is insufficient; we must also promote it, so that it will spread.

This explanation has an evident lesson for our own day: To end our exile, we need to do more than adopt the prescription of our prophets; we must implement our mission in a manner that is attractive for our neighbors and children. Mitzvot must not be accompanied by a sigh; rather, we are charged with finding a way to bring joy and satisfaction to observance. When we come to practice and publicize a Judaism which is not only goal-oriented but also contagiously Purimesque and joy-oriented, then we, too, will see the end of a Diaspora, and the return of the Beit haMikdash.

³⁶ For a related approach to the mitzvot of *matanot la'evyonim* and *mishloach manot* and the roles of donor and recipient, see *Az Nidbiru* 6:80.

³⁷ *Manot haLevi*, cited by *Chatam Sofer, Orach Chaim* 196, among others.

³⁸ Talmud Bavli, *Megilah* 11b.

³⁹ Esther 9:18-19 indicates that these mitzvot were practiced spontaneously by the Jews before they were enshrined in law in 9:20-23.

⁴⁰ Yeshayah 1:27.