

The Difference Between Gifting and Giving

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The Jewish Center

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In advance of my dissertation defense, I enlisted the help of a number of people to serve as copy editors. And I have to confess that it was humbling to see so much red ink spilled across my work. Who knew that anyone after sixth grade cared so much about split infinitives? Of course there were objective error – like the time I misspelled *Jewish*. But each reader also had his or her buzzwords – words or formulations that set them off. One reader objected every time I used the word *hybridity*; another didn't like the word *global*. Someone flagged the word *recency*. He said, "too new." I said that's what I admire about the word: its recency!

Everyone has a word or two that they simply can't stand – usually for reasons that are not entirely rational or explicable.

For me, one of those words is in the air this time of year. Whenever someone uses the word *gifting*, it always makes me cringe. When I was a kid, gift was a noun and if you wanted to get one, someone had to give it to you. So I started to wonder why turning the word *gift* into a verb is so hard for me to stomach.

Right before Yaakov gifts to Esav a tribute of various livestock, he encounters a mysterious man with whom he struggles. Maybe he's a real person; maybe he's an angel; maybe he's Yaakov's shadow.

Whoever he is, there's something that happens at the end of the narrative that requires our attention. Yaakov says to him מה שמך – tell me your name.

And the question is why.

According to the text, they've been wrestling all night.

Why in the final moments of the scene does Yaakov suddenly wish to know the identity of his opponent?

What I'd like to suggest is that the answer hinges on our understanding of a much larger pattern in the life of Yaakov Avinu.

On the most basic level, there's no question that the defining episode of Yaakov's life is the moment he dupes his father and steals the bracha of the firstborn that should rightfully have been bestowed upon his brother.

So it's fascinating to notice that Yaakov spends the rest of his life trying to rewind the clock and set things right. It's the story of Yaakov the taker trying to transform himself into Yaakov the giver.

So wherever we find Yaakov, we find him giving something to someone.

- He meets Rachel and jumps at the opportunity to give of himself and water her flock;
- He's told that Esav is approaching so he prepares a massive tribute;
- His sons are travelling to Egypt to see the viceroy so Yaakov insists that they take with them a gift of Canaanite delicacies.

And on and on and on.

But I want to add another dimension to this narrative.

It's not just about the acts of taking and giving.
It's about the cycles that get generated by these acts.

When Yaakov takes the bracha intended for Esav, his crime engenders so much enmity that Esav wants revenge – and a very specific kind of revenge. He wants to kill his brother – he wants not only to take back what's his, but to take the life of Yaakov.

If taking begets taking, Yaakov comes to understand, then giving begets giving.

So whenever we find Yaakov, we don't just find a scene of generosity; we find a scene of mutual generosity. Wherever there's an act of kindness, it's always followed up by a second act of kindness.

Sometimes Yaakov initiates the sequence; sometimes he reacts to the gesture of someone else. But the Torah highlights for us that the act of giving never exists in a vacuum; the call of the gift is always answered by the announcement of another gift.

When Yaakov dreams of the ladder, Hashem gives him a commitment;

הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה שֹׁכֵב עָלֶיהָ--לְךָ אֶתְנַנְנָהּ, וְיָזַרְעָהּ.

The land upon which you're resting – will be yours!

So what does Yaakov do? Remember, he's homeless and penniless. He doesn't actually have anything to give. So he says:

וְהָאָבִן הַזֶּאת, אֲשֶׁר-שָׁמַתִּי מִצִּבְהָ--יְהִיָּה, בַּיַּת אֱלֹהִים; וְכָל אֲשֶׁר תִּתֶּן-לִי, עָשָׂר אֲעֹשְׂרֶנּוּ לְךָ.

I'm going to return to this spot – and when I do – I'll give you a tithe! In the absence of anything to give, Yaakov gives his word.

Yaakov waters Rachel's flocks. And then what happens? She runs to tell her father

וַיְבִיאָהּ, אֶל-בֵּיתוֹ

Lavan brings him into his home.

Yaakov's act of kindness inspires a gesture of hospitality.

And then in our parsha: Yaakov prevails upon Esav to accept a gift. So Esav turns around and offers to accompany Yaakov and his family. It's the nicest thing Esav could possibly do! What a demonstration of the extent to which Esav has really buried the hatchet.

Or think of one final example from the end of Bereishit. Pharaoh welcomes Yosef's family to Egypt and generously settles them in the very best part of the country – במיטב הארץ. So how does Yaakov respond? What can one give to the richest and most powerful man in the world?

ויברך יעקב את פרעה

He bestows a blessing on the king.

There simply is no gesture of giving in the life of Yaakov that exists independently.

And so the answer to our riddle is hiding in plain sight.

To receive a bracha in the Torah, one's name – one's identity – has to be known. The bracha can't just be pointed in the general direction of the intended party. It has to be bestowed on a particular person.

The מלאך asks Yaakov for his name so that he can give him a bracha. And then Yaakov does the very same thing.

He asks the name of the מלאך so that he can bless him.

It would be impossible for Yaakov to receive a gift without turning around and then giving a gift to the giver or to someone else. It's not just a question of reciprocity or social convention.

In the life of Yaakov Avinu – in the life of the Jew – giving, by definition, begets more giving.

Perhaps this is why I am so bothered by the word *gifting*. It's not just that it reduces the beauty of giving and turns it into a commercial transaction. It's that it circumscribes an act that should rightfully be seen as part of a much wider network of human interactions – the currency of which is generosity.

One of the great philanthropists of the Los Angeles Jewish community was a 96 year old Holocaust survivor who passed away last year. He supported shuls and schools and all kinds of Jewish institutions, both locally and around the world. He knew that I was a rabbi at The Jewish Center. And whenever I would see him, he would always remind me of his story. He said that when he came the upper west side as a young man after the war in the 1940s, he came with nothing. Someone suggested he come to our shul. Rabbi Jung took him under his wing and found him his first job. A little kindness was shown to him when it mattered, and he spent the rest of his life showering kindness and generosity on others.

After Rabbi Jung passed away, we named our chesed fund in his memory. Every year before his yahrzeit, we ask our members to contribute so that we can continue the work he began.

Every day people call on us in their moments of need.

- Someone's fallen behind and can't make the rent;
- A family's breadwinner and is out of work and the tuition costs are just too much;
- Or someone is sick and their insurance just won't cover enough of the bill. The list goes on.

The Jewish Center is able to help in cases like these through our chesed fund. And each time we do, it opens up another web of virtue. Of course we can feel a sense of satisfaction in the knowledge that we've helped someone. But who even knows what further acts of kindness we'll inspire down the road?

Both globally and locally, we've been facing a barrage of pretty crummy news recently. The best way to defend against despair is to create virtuous circles. And those virtuous circles start with acts of חסד and צדקה.

In our tradition, it's not the gifts that keep on giving; it's the givers.