

Parashat Vayakhel – Think twice before you put your money

The North American - Jewish comedian Jack Benny, told in one of his shows, the story of a man who was returning to his home when he was suddenly accosted by a mugger. After asking for a match to light a cigarette, the mugger said: "Don't make a move... this is a stickup... Your money or your life!". The man looked at the mugger but he was silent, so the mugger repeated his demand: "I said Your money or your life!". And the man answered: Wait!, I am thinking, I am thinking!

I wanted to share this story because I would like to speak with you this Shabbat about Money. Jews have a particular relationship with money. From one side we have been unfairly accused of being miserly, usurers, stingy and avaricious. Some people still say we love money, and that rich Jews use their money to take advantage of poor people and even to control the world. Many people see us as a much larger community and always as a wealthy one. "Alevay", if it only was true.

As you may know, the image of the Jew who loves money came from the middle ages when it was prohibited for Jews to participate in the open market and have professions. Money lending was an aberration for Christians and the only place where Jews could make their living was lending money to Christian people. That was the origin of the stereotype, depicted for example, by works as Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The stereotype, then, was strengthened one more time thanks to the economic success of North American Jews in the 20th Century, which as you know was only a product of sacrifice, hard work, and this capacity of survival and resilience that was so characteristic of the Jewish immigrants.

But the truth is that Jewish people have been tremendously generous during the history. In times of persecution that solidarity was expressed towards the necessity of the community, but in times of openness Jews have been always supportive of the general society. Jewish communities support different charities, schools, sometimes build hospitals, homes for old people, as in our community the Bnai Brith, Hadassah and the synagogue itself. Our tradition of solidarity it is very old, and if we try to trace its origins we will find that the first time the people of Israel showed generosity as a group was when they were asked to build the Tabernacle in the desert.

We already studied in Parashat Terumah that Moses asked for donations and everyone was so generous and committed that now in our Parasha Vayakhel Moses has to say "stop from bringing donations". And in the next week's Parasha, Pekudei, Moses gives a full and detailed description of how the money was used and what was the cost of the materials. (We learn from his example that everyone, including the most respectful and distinguished people, should be absolutely transparent with the use of public money.)

But what I wanted to tell you is that together with this old tradition of solidarity of the Jewish people, the Torah shows us a completely different side about generosity that was actually bad for the Jewish people. Last week we studied the episode of the Golden Calf, when the people committed idolatry worshipping an animal. And from where did they take the gold for making it? The Torah tells that they were so generous that immediately after Aaron's request they went to their tents to bring the precious metal for the Golden Calf. So the same way they were so generous to contribute for the building of the Tabernacle, which was a commandment from God and the place that was going to represent the presence of God, the same way they were ready to give for the Golden Calf, which represented exactly the opposite. The Rabbis of the Midrash say: "'Foolish people who give to one cause and then turn around and give to the opposite cause with equal enthusiasm!" We can say many things about this generation: They complained for everything, they wanted

to return to Egypt... but they were so generous that they gave for everything; they even didn't ask themselves what was the purpose of the money they were giving

When I teach about the commandment of Tzedakah, I always use a story about two very similar men, with similar jobs and responsibilities, who were asked to give Tzedakah by a poor woman who they knew whose husband had terminal illness. The first man was very moved by the woman's story, he listened carefully, was almost crying, offered emotional support and then he opened his wallet and wrote a check for \$25 dollars. The second men didn't have so much time so after hearing the story, he said "I am sorry", didn't show any sign of empathy but he opened his wallet and wrote a cheque for \$100.

And when I tell the story I say that every man represents an extreme view: One, where feelings are more important than the money itself, and the other where money is more important than feelings. Obviously the ideal is always to give with feeling and also giving importance to money, but what if we have to choose between them? Which would be the Jewish way?

And the answer is that for Jews, Tzedakah is something practical: We need feelings (starting point) but the priority is the main purpose: To satisfy the economic need of the person, then the emotional one. In other words: We give with the heart, but is not only about heart, first of all is also about thinking, reflecting, about using the "zechel".

When I say this I have to recognize that more than once I have given my money without thinking enough. I have contributed to causes without asking very much what their purpose was, just because someone asked me and I felt moved. Then I realized that this organization was only a fake institution that was used to "no kosher" purposes. Without knowing, just because I didn't take the time to investigate, and because I trusted in the person who asked the money, finally I did exactly the same than the generation of the Golden Calf, I was supporting something that was exactly the opposite of what I should have given.

And I think the message here is that the Jewish value of giving is not just about opening our hearts. We are good people, we have a great heart and we have to feel proud of ourselves, but when we don't limit our heart with our minds, when we don't investigate what will happen with that money, if we are not sure that the money will be used for a good cause, a legitimate one... what could happen is that our good intentions will become not-so-good deeds, because we will be contributing to something that we probably would not have agreed to contribute at the beginning... We will be helping to build something that we don't really want to be built... we will be giving for a cause that doesn't represent us and even contradict our own causes!!

Judaism says: Being a good person it means not only acting with the heart, you have to think after you feel, and then you act. Remember the message of the Tefillin: You put it in your arm, with the "bayit" (the box) of the arm facing the heart, and the second one goes on the head: Heart – Feelings, Head – Thinking and Arm – Action, they go together.

Shabbat Shalom!