

Rabbi Alexis Berk

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Generosity and God

Many of you know our family was in a serious car accident last December. I found myself, for the first time ever, an ICU patient. What a scary time; what tender care. One moment of tender care came when the doctor visited me with the news that, because of internal bleeding, we would need to consider a blood transfusion. We would monitor to see if that would become necessary.

In my pained state of semi-consciousness I remember feeling an odd panic, and thinking this would be a problem. You see, I've never donated blood. For most of my life, I didn't weigh enough. This might have changed in recent years (thanks, New Orleans), but I've still never done it. I felt this wave of angst about taking blood when I had never given any. I mean, really, thank goodness someone had done it. What? Do we just expect it's going to be there – having never, ever paid in? But they didn't even ask me. Can you imagine, though? "We're thinking you will need some blood. But, we can't just give it away, of course. We'll need to know if you've ever made a deposit before we can consider you eligible for a withdrawal." Or something.

Should it be that way? Maybe. That would be the fairest way to distribute blood, I suppose. But, luckily, humanity is even more sophisticated than that. So, we don't need this kind of equation. We have God. Thank God for blood donors. Stay tuned for a sec. We'll come back to that.

Giving back to the community – a good idea, perhaps. But, now, exceedingly trite. Or worse. I have become kind of repulsed by this expression – "giving back." It's now our default cultural idiom for doing something good. Giving back. I really don't like it. I recently read, for example, all the ways that Justin Bieber is giving back – in the Philippines, Guatemala, Africa, not to mention hospital rooms, and schools. It seems like he's a charity minded guy, when he's not doing other things. And, the media will tell you he's all over the place "giving back." Giving back what? That which was given to him? In a formula of exchange? Paying back a debt? Returning something? Giving back.

Would that be offloading what has been given to you – back to the original giver? Like you got it and now it's time to give it back?

To me, this makes no Jewish sense. I'll tell you why. We don't give back. It's just not like that. The mere idea of giving as "giving back" reduces our existential mutuality to some concrete compensation. As though something is owed. As though there are two things: getting and giving back. And, this just goes to and fro. And, if we don't give back, we are somehow holding on to something that belongs to someone else. Give it back!

No, indeed. Jewish thought and practice is very much more complex than that. "Giving back" is not a Jewish way to express acts of generosity. You see, in the Jewish sensibility, there is nothing about giving *back*. In Judaism, it's actually the opposite: generosity is approached as justifiably and intentionally selfish, self-driven, and self-rewarded. Generosity is one of the most selfish acts there is. [What is happening right now?]

It's not about giving back. It's about giving in.

What does it mean to give in? To go with the natural, innate drive to give. We are wired this way. You may know of the elemental Jewish concepts of *yetzer tov* and *yetzer ra*. These are often translated as the good inclination and the evil inclination – and they are conveyed as aspects of ourselves that battle one another within our souls. These literal translations as "good" and "evil" inclination do no justice to the complexity of human inclinations. Some explain further by saying they are the propensities within us to be driven by ego (*yetzer ra*), or driven by morality (*yetzer tov*). But, this is a false dichotomy, too. The wise ancient rabbis explain that the *yetzer ra* – ego – is the yeast that makes us rise. We want to win. We want to succeed. We want to be the best.

A dear friend of mine who does medical research at Vanderbilt would always curse and celebrate the boundless egos that discover new drugs to eliminate disease. She would observe with wonder and awe the ego driven accomplishments of life changing generosity that would happen in her lab every day. Each one wants to be the first one to figure it out. Each wants to win the race for the cure! Is that giving back? Absolutely not. Is it selfish? Totally. Is it a net positive? No question about it. In fact, the drive to be the best is a key component to generosity.

Is this a problem? I'd say definitely not. It's a solution. So much so, in fact, that the sages of our tradition had this illustrious debate in the Talmud: the rabbis ask, what if someone does an apparently selfless mitzvah for a selfish reason? You know, figuring out this genetic map will put *me* on the map! Or, helping people makes *me* feel good. When I give money, I'm proud to see *my* name on that list. That kind of thing. They ask, could it ever be wrong to do right? And, what if it's selfish to want to do right? Does that make it wrong? It all gets summed up in the Talmudic tractate like this: *mi'toch she'lo lishma, ba lishma*, literally: in the middle of something that is not for its own sake, it becomes for its own sake. What appears to be for one reason, actually *is* another reason. And, that's very good.

What does all of this mean? Does it sound like a paradox? Some mysterious koan? It is a paradox, but I don't think it's mysterious at all. I think it's luminous and inspired. Listen to this explanation from a book literally called *The Paradox of Generosity*:

"Generosity is paradoxical....By spending ourselves for others' well-being, we enhance our own standing. In letting go of some of what we own, we better secure our own lives. By giving ourselves away, we ourselves move toward flourishing. This is not only a philosophical or religious teaching; it is a sociological fact."¹ This book, *The Paradox of Generosity*, is filled with over 250 pages of graphs, charts, chapters and case studies "offering a wealth of evidence [that] reveals a consistent link between demonstrating generosity and leading a better life: more generous people are happier, suffer fewer illnesses and injuries, live with a greater sense of purpose, and experience less depression."²

The Dalai Lama speaks of working to benefit others as "selfish altruism."³

Have you ever sought proof of God? Have you ever wondered if there's even a God at all? Have you struggled with an omnipotent God who must be taken to task for allowing bad things to happen to good people? Of course; we all have. Maybe there is no God. Prove it.

¹ Christian Smith & Hilary Davidson, *The Paradox of Generosity*, p. 1.

² Ibid., front jacket.

³ http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_helpers_high

Plato and Aristotle and Maimonides have all offered religious and scientific and philosophical proofs of God. And they are all fascinating and scholarly. My name doesn't really belong on the same list, but, I would like to offer my own proof of God, and it is this:

We are designed to feel good when we do good. We feel bad when we mess up. It's in the wiring. We feel this swelling in the soul when we are interacting generously with another; when we are offering something purposeful to the world; when we are giving in a meaningful way. We feel a surge of something powerfully good. Don't you think this is Wisdom in the most transcendent way?

Something is implanted in us that makes the heart sing from generosity. How much clearer can a Divine message be? Science proves religion, time and again – in the most elegant way.

Science proves religion. A recent study out of Cal Berkeley's Center for the Greater Good offers this: "Psychologists have identified a typical state of euphoria reported by those engaged in charitable activity. They call it 'helper's high,' and it's based on the theory that giving produces endorphins in the brain that provide a mild version of a morphine high.

Research at the National Institutes of Health showed that the same area of the brain that is activated in response to food or sex ...lit up when the participants in the study thought about giving money to a charity.⁴ A separate but almost identical study out of Emory found the same thing.

"“On one hand, it's striking that volunteering even occurs,' says Mark Snyder, a psychologist and head of the Center for the Study of the Individual and Society at the University of Minnesota. 'It seems to run against the strong dynamics of self-interest. There is simply nothing in society that says that someone is mandated to help anyone else.' Yet 1 in 3 adults do meaningful volunteer work on a sustained basis, he notes, and the United States has one of the world's highest rates of volunteerism.”⁵

Want to hear something even crazier? And, by crazier, I mean even more awe inspiring and faith affirming. We are wired to care if other people think we are caring.

⁴ http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_helpers_high

⁵ <http://money.usnews.com/money/personal-finance/articles/2012/04/04/why-helping-others-makes-us-happy>

Yes, we want to feel good inside ourselves. But also, we want others to think highly of us. Is it a superficial, vain desire to care what others think? It turns out, no; it's holy. We are interconnected, and we want others to find us admirable. And, we seem to be wired to admire people based on right action and generosity. All of this makes just way too much mystical and practical sense.

Another proof: this past May, the New York Times ran an article written by economists at Harvard and psychologists at Yale. They were interested in how to get people to help relieve the relentless drought in California, attempting to figure out how to make people cooperate and conserve. They tried the most obvious: make water really expensive. Guess what? They found “Californians are stubbornly unresponsive to higher water prices.”⁶ No one minds paying. In fact, the study found that while “changing the material costs and benefits of cooperation often doesn’t work....What does consistently work may be surprising: interventions based not on money but on leveraging social concerns.”⁷ The researchers go on to ask, “Why do social interventions work? Research on the evolution of cooperation [reveals that]...we cooperate because it makes us look good. This can be going on consciously or, more often, subconsciously (a gut feeling of guilt when your neighbor sees you turning on your sprinkler). When your choices are observable by others, it makes it possible for good actions to benefit your reputation.”⁸

We are intricately wired, you see. One, to feel good when we connect and give. And, two, to feel bad when we don’t do what’s best in the eyes of our neighbor. This science is really religion. **It is all of Yom Kippur – the whole point of Yom Kippur – in a radiant, beaming, Divine scientific and spiritual package.**

“Happiness,” wrote W.B. Yeats, “is neither virtue nor pleasure, nor this thing nor that, it is simply growth. We are happy when we are growing.”⁹ We are happy when we are giving. We are happy when we are contributing. We feel low and sad when we are not part of a greater good momentum. When we are not interconnected, we are isolated and desolate. This must be by design. It just must be.

⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/17/opinion/sunday/how-to-get-people-to-pitch-in.html?_r=0

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Christian Smith & Hilary Davidson, *The Paradox of Generosity*, p. 199.

A few weeks ago, I had a fantastic Mexican lunch on a patio with an old friend. It was delicious and beautiful, and too much, so I got a to-go box. But, we also had leftover salsa and guacamole, so I asked if we could take that, too. Which would, of course, require some extra fresh chips – in a separate bag, if that’s not too much trouble. It’ll be great the next day.

But, on the way home, of course, I passed a man on the neutral ground on Louisiana, braving the heat – with the all too common cardboard sign – anything helps. I had this huge meal, chips and all, that I was able to hand right out of the window. I’m telling you, this surge of joy came while giving the meal to him – I know you know the feeling. I was almost blushing with delight, the internal round of applause was deafening. And, this is nuts, really. It’s silly to even tell you this story. But, why was that jolt of joy unlike any other I had that day? I was just so pleased with myself and the opportunity, and so glad I had asked for the chips.

I just want to say this tonight: I believe that this jolt of joy, this surge we get, is proof of God, the voice of God, the touch of God. Nothing more, nothing less. How much plainer could it be? In this world, all we need to do is chase this feeling, this fulfillment of spirit and soul, with all our might. And, imagine. If we just wanted to feel good more often, we would simply manifest our generosity and interconnectedness in the most rigorous, unrelenting way. Could there be a better, more brilliant plan for the universe than this?

One last Talmudic insight: the rabbis taught that one really important way to show love to God (and one another) is through your wealth. [Oh, no. You’re not doing that, are you? Please don’t do it....] I won’t.

(I’m not going to ask you for money. We’ve got the whole **voluntary** system. Just stick around for a sec.)

The Talmud taught that bringing all of our resources to offer the world is the way we love God, the God who designed it all to work in this holy, incredible way. Make no mistake. It’s meant to be like this. Pure genius.

In just a moment, we will read this illuminating translation of the classic prayer *V’ahavta* – turned so that this message is captured in such a sacred and prayerful way:

“Our sages teach:

Love God with all your strength.

This means:

“Show love with your wealth;
put your resources toward good purposes;
serve the Most High with everything you possess.”

Those who reject all material possessions;
who spurn comfort and wealth; who deny the body –
they lose their ability to appreciate life’s value.

Poverty and suffering do not cultivate the love of God.

Rather: learn to love life; live fully; cherish the world and enjoy its treasures.

Then you will gain a full measure of love.

Then will your heart expand with gratitude.

And only then will you give with a joyful heart.¹⁰

The blood banks are not supplied by people paying in for themselves. Isn’t that magical? It turns out, no one does it for the cookie or the juice box. But, they do do it because of that surge of soul level satisfaction, that unmistakable internal round of applause that comes from doing a good thing. There is nothing like it. Because it’s God.

A storied symphony conductor of international repute is said “to have jumped into a taxi outside the opera house and shouted to the driver ‘Hurry, hurry!’ ‘Very good, sir,’ said the driver. ‘Where to?’ ‘It doesn’t matter,’ said the conductor impatiently. ‘They need me everywhere!’”¹¹

We are needed everywhere. And, we are wired to be excited by that. It’s not about giving back. It’s about giving in. Giving in to being part of the dazzling plan of a most skillful Creator.

What a gift.

¹⁰ Mishkan Hanefesh, Yom Kippur evening, p. 31.

¹¹ Rosamund Stone Zander & Benjamin Zander, *The Art of Possibility*, p. 67.