



## **DEVARIM**

**Re'eh/Elul / 27 Av**

Infinity In The Palm Of Your Hand

August 19, 2017

INFINITY IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND  
THE POWER OF CHARITY TO MOVE HEAVEN AND EARTH

ABSTRACT

From the beginning of time humans have always been in search of heaven. From the building of the Tower of Babel to the spacecraft of our modern day, from theologians, mystics and philosophers to religious practices and cultural rituals, every race, creed and community seeks to touch the beyond.

William Blake said it so well:

“To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.”

But how? How can you hold infinity in the palm of your hand? And how can you keep it there?

As we bless and enter the month of Elul, we increase in charity which has the power to open up the channels of blessings, and abolish any decree. But how can money – a physical object, indeed, the most materialistic of objects – affect the order of spiritual realms? How can a coin extended to a beggar affect the destiny of our lives and of existence itself?! How can it assure us a blessed new year?

A dramatic verse in this week's Torah portion, eloquently elucidated by the great Baal Shem Tov – coupled with a tinge of humorous anecdotes – teaches us how infinity and beyond is captured in the simple act of stretching out a helping hand to a person in need.

## 1. The Bad News

With economic uncertainty continuing to haunt us, you can imagine that it has taken an acute toll on those of us involved in fundraising. In trying times like these, we therefore need to develop a sense of humor to lighten the load a bit.

A rabbi stands before his congregation and reports to them that a massive hole has been found in the roof of the synagogue.

“Now I have good news and bad news for you,” the Rabbi continues. “The good news is that we have the money to repair it; the bad news is that the money is in your pockets.”

At the same time, today's Torah chapter is particularly welcome, as it offers us the good news: a powerful incentive to open our arms and our pockets.

## 2. The Good News: Rosh Chodesh Elul

Today we bless the coming month of Elul, when the countdown to Rosh Hashanah begins.

Later this week, following the morning prayers, the *shofar* will be blown – and it will be blown every morning thereafter throughout this month of Elul – to remind one and all that only four weeks remain to the momentous Day of Judgment. Some Sephardi Jews will begin reciting *Selichot*, the prayers for forgiveness, which Ashkenazi Jews recite a bit later in the month. As we enter the month of Elul every Jew paying attention will be more keenly aware that it's time to get your house in order – and as soon as possible.

For, as we remember from the High Holidays liturgy: “On Rosh Hashanah, it is written ... and on Yom Kippur it is sealed ... who will live and who will die ... who by fire and who by water...”

But, as we also remember: “*teshuvah* (repentance), *tefillah* (prayer), and *tzedakah* (charity) reverse the evil decree.”

## 3. The Power of Charity

Today, I would like to speak about the power of charity, an especially apt topic for the month of Elul because one of the meanings of Elul is exactly that – giving to the poor.

For, in the Book of Esther, we find a verse whose first Hebrew letters spell out Elul, and this verse reads:

*Ish lerei'eibu umatanot la'evyonim* – “Each man [sending food] to his friend and gifts to the poor.”<sup>1</sup>

So in the month of Elul we are meant to increase our charitable giving, in the hopes of reversing any evil decree that may be waiting for us on the Day of Judgment.

But let me ask you: Does that make rational sense to you? How can a quarter extended to a beggar change the mind of G-d? How can a coin have that kind of power? How can a physical, material object affect the order of things in the spiritual realms?

The short answer is: It is not the money, but the heart and hand of the giver. As so dramatically captured in a poetic verse in today's Parsha.

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<sup>1</sup> Esther 9:22.

## 4. Touching Heaven

From the beginning of time humans have always wanted to touch heaven. From the building of the Tower of Babel to the spacecraft of our modern day, from theologians, mystics and philosophers to religious practices and cultural rituals, every race, creed and community has sought to reach the beyond.

Michelangelo's greatest painting depicts Adam stretching out his hand, reaching upward to touch the extended finger of G-d. This image has resonated in the hearts of every person who has seen it – reflecting our own longings and yearnings for transcendence.

William Blake said it so well: “To see a world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour.”

But how? How can you hold infinity in the palm of your hand? And how can you keep it there?

A dramatic verse in this week's Torah portion – eloquently elucidated by the great Baal Shem Tov (just a few years before Blake, who was born in 1857, three years before the Baal Shem Tov's passing) – teaches us how infinity and beyond is captured in the simple act of stretching out a helping hand to a person in need.

## 5. Open Your Hand

We read in today's Torah portion:

[If] any of your brothers is poor ... do not harden your heart or close your hand against your needy brother. Open your hand generously, and extend to him any credit he needs to take care of his wants.<sup>2</sup>

The exact Hebrew expression used here is *patoach tiftach et yadecha* – *patoach* and *tiftach* are both forms of the same verb *li'ftoach*, meaning “to open,” so that this verse literally reads: “open, you shall open your hand.”

The redundancy emphasizes the critical importance and need to open your hand and give. Rashi comments that the repeated “open” suggests that one has to repeatedly open one's hand to the needy, and Maimonides recommends giving to everyone in order not to harden one's heart.<sup>3</sup>

To further underscore the importance of giving, just three verses later the Torah repeats the exact same instruction, using the very same repetitive phrasing (*patoach tiftach et yadecha*):

The poor will never cease to exist in the land, so I am commanding you to open your hand generously to your poor and destitute brother...<sup>4</sup>

2 Deuteronomy 15:7-8.

3 See Rashi on the verse above. Also see Sifrei 15:135. Maimonides, Gifts to the Poor 7:2.

4 Deuteronomy 15:11.

And just so there is absolutely no mistake about it, in between the above repetitions there is yet another redundancy – in this case using two forms of the verb *l'tet*, meaning “to give” (*naton titen lo*):

Therefore give generously to him, and let your heart not hurt when you give to him for because of this, the Lord, your G-d will bless you in all your endeavors, no matter what you do.<sup>5</sup>

What is the meaning of “open your hand?” Simply, we can say that this is a common expression used to convey the importance of not closing your hand, but to open it and be giving to others in need. But there is a lot more to it, as the Baal Shem Tov explains.

But before we get to that, allow me to share...

## 6. Clever Beggar (Humor; Optional)

Baron de Rothschild was a deeply religious man and he certainly lived by all these Torah mandates, becoming well known for his philanthropy and charitable giving. It was no wonder, then, that every beggar found his way to his door.<sup>6</sup>

Two brothers, Gansch and Mishpocheh, who could not or would not work for their daily bread, were regular callers at the Rothschild resident where, once a month, they were given 100 marks each.

It happened that Gansch died, so Mishpocheh made the usual call alone. The family treasurer who disbursed funds to the poor handed him the usual 100 marks.

“Just a chicken-pluckin’ minute!” Mishpocheh protested. “What’s with this hundred mark business? I’m entitled to two hundred, and when a man is entitled he’s entitled, so hand it over!”

“You’re entitled to nothing!” retorted the treasurer. “Your brother, Gansch is dead.”

“Yes, and I’m his rightful heir, not Rothschild!”

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On another occasion, a beggar tried to improve on the 100 mark amount that Baron de Rothschild was known to hand out, by appealing to the philanthropist’s sympathies:

“I am no run-of-the mill beggar,” he said. “In fact, I am a musician – one of the best. For more than ten years I played in the Vienna Philharmonic, but after the orchestra was disbanded, I simply could not find any more work. Believe me, Baron, ever since then I have had nothing but bad luck.”

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<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 15:10.

<sup>6</sup> These stories are related in the Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor by Henry D. Spalding, p. 31.

“What instrument do you play?” asked the Baron sympathetically.

“The bassoon.”

“Oh really? Why that’s my favorite instrument. I just love the dulcet tones of a bassoon! In fact, I have one right here in my music room. My dear fellow, would you play something for me?”

The beggar paled and then buried his head in his hands. “Oy vey,” he moaned, “I *told* you that I have nothing but bad luck. Of all the thousands of instruments in the world, I had to go and pick the bassoon!”

Back to our theme, “open you hand”...

## 7. To See G-d’s Face

What is the meaning of “open your hand?” Simply, we can say that this is a common expression used to convey the importance of not closing your hand, but to open it and be giving to others in need.

But the Baal Shem Tov, who in his inimitable way reveals the deeper soul dimension in all our experiences, offers us a dramatic interpretation and penetrating insight into the words “open your hand.”<sup>7</sup>

In Psalms we read: *Ani b’tzedek echezeh Ponecho, es’bi’oh be’hokitz temunosecho*, “Through righteousness I will see Your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with Your likeness.

Explains the Baal Shem Tov: When a person gives a coin (a *prutah*) to a needy person, he creates a unification (*yechud*) of the Divine with this material universe – and thus we reveal the face of G-d.

How does this happen?

## 8. G-d’s Most Holy Name

The Divine Presence manifests in G-d’s most holy name which we are forbidden to pronounce. It is a name made up of four Hebrew letters – *yud*, *hei*, *vav*, *hei*, whose every element holds deep secrets.

The shape of the *yud* resembles a dot, and it is symbolized by the coin given to the needy. The five fingers of the giver symbolize the letter *hei* whose numerical equivalent is five. The outstretched hand symbolizes the vertical line of the *vav* and the five fingers of the recipient symbolize the final *hei*.

This is how the act of giving – opening your hand to a person in need – unifies the holy name. And in so doing it brings down great compassion from above, because this name is the source and essence of compassion.

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<sup>7</sup> Mevasser Tzedek Parshas Re’eh (cited in Baal Shem Tov al haTorah). See also Arizal in Sefer haLikkutim, Parshas Re’eh.

## 9. Taking Initiative

Now, all this is achieved only when the giver initiates and opens his hand to another (and does not wait for the poor man's hand to open first), because only then are the four letters of the divine name in the proper order: First the *yud* (the coin), then the *heb* (the giver's five fingers), the *vav* (his outstretched arm) and finally the last *heb* (the fingers of the recipient).

However, when the needy person initiates and opens his begging hand first, then the four letters of the divine name are not exactly in their proper order, and indeed the symbolism begins backwards (with the *heb* of the recipient's five fingers)!

As I walked out of Synagogue the other day, a beggar came over to me asking for some change. I felt really bad since I had no cash with me. Not even a penny. I profusely apologized, saying that I have no money. Without missing a beat, the fellow tells me: "so why don't you go get a job"...

This is the meaning, says the Baal Shem Tov, of the verse in Psalms: *Ani b'tzedek echezeh Ponecho, es'bi'oh be'hokitz temunosecho*, "Through righteousness (*b'tzedek*) I will see Your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with Your likeness."<sup>8</sup>

When the *tzedek* (*tzedakah*) begins with me (*ani*), I initiate and open my hand, then "I will see [G-d's] face," so to speak. I will have caused the unification of the four letters of G-d's name, which manifests the divine face of compassion.

But when *es'bi'oh be'hokitz* – the needy person awakes me by opening his hand first and asking for charity, then I only see "[G-d's] likeness" (*temunosecho*) – I only see the reflection of the divine four letters, backwards like in a mirror, but I do not actually see "[G-d's] face."

Now we can appreciate the meaning in the verse of this week's Torah Chapter – "**open your hand:**"

Initiate. Don't wait for a needy person to open his hand and come begging. Open your hand first – unify the four letters in the proper order – and bring down divine compassion, which we all so sorely need.

## 10. Initiative In Practice

What does initiative look like in practice? Well, let me tell you a story:

Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveichik, the 19th century rabbi of Slutsk who was better known as the Beis Halevi, was once sitting with his students when a man approached him with a strange question: "Is it permitted for me to drink milk instead of wine at the Passover Seder?"

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<sup>8</sup> Psalms 17:15.

The Beis Halevi responded with a question: “Are you forbidden to drink wine for health reasons?”

“No,” the man replied, “it’s just that I can’t afford wine.”

Instead of answering the man’s question, the Beis Halevi gave him 25 rubles. “Now you can drink wine at your Seder,” he said.

After the man left, a student asked the Beis Halevi, “Why did you give him twenty-five rubles. Five would be more than enough to purchase the required amount of wine.”

The Beis Halevi answered: “If he intended to use milk at the Seder that means he also didn’t have money for meat. And he probably didn’t have money for the other items. I wanted to give him enough so that he could have a complete Seder.”<sup>9</sup>

That’s what initiative looks like in practice.

## 11. The Art of Giving

And what a powerful lesson in the art of giving.

You may think that, if you are helping another person, what difference does it really make who stretches out their arm first – the giver or the receiver. After all, many people look away when someone approaches them, so you can pat yourself on the back for at least responding to someone else’s need – even if you did not initiate the effort. To boot, you can also argue that how were you supposed to know that someone is needy if they don’t open their hand first by asking for help?

In truth though, the order matters – and in a very fundamental way. It is the difference between seeing G-d’s face or only a reflection. It is the difference between holding infinity in your hand or just a fleeting sample of it.

## 12. Look At Your Hand

So now I ask you all: Look at your hand. Look closely at your five fingers ... at your arm.

Right there, in your own body, you have two of the four holy letters of G-d’s ineffable name – the *hei* and the *vav*. Right now, you have the power to transform your hand and arm into a divine agent, and make of it a cosmic channel of infinite compassion.

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<sup>9</sup> See: [http://chabadstanford.org/article.htm?Obsessed\\_With\\_Giving-49](http://chabadstanford.org/article.htm?Obsessed_With_Giving-49)



Now imagine taking a coin out of your pocket and adding the first letter, the *yud*.

All you have to do is to unite heaven and earth is to find a person in need, stretch out your arm and give him or her the coin. The heavens will move. All the letters of the divine name will have become united, and the entire universe below and above will never be the same.

My dear friends: The simple act of opening your hand, stretching out your arm, placing a coin into the hand of a needy person – contains profound mysteries and enormous powers.

Infinity is always in the palm of your hand. You can change the world at the touch of a finger – literally. There is no earthly reason to wait. Amen.

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