



Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe  
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*Nedivut/Generosity: Enough Blessing for Everyone*

Let me begin with a question to you all. If you had 100 dollars of *tzedakah* to give, which would be more highly valued in Jewish tradition: to give the whole amount to one person? Or to give many small gifts, such as one dollar, to one hundred people? Raise your hand – what do you think: One large gift? or many small ones? The answer is, a hundred one-dollar gifts are preferable. Now, thinking about the reason that our sages would value the higher number of gifts, how many of you would think it's because it's important to help as many people as possible? Or, that the goal is to spread the spirit of giving around, so that the most people's hearts are lifted? The rest of you, who haven't raised your hands yet, must know the right answer. The reason for giving many gifts is not about the recipients at all. It's about how our engagement in the act of giving changes us, exercises our giving muscle, and thereby has an effect on our character. The goal of our sages is to make you and me more giving people. Generosity is such an important attribute to the sages that developing it is valued even more than the impact of our giving.<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew word for generosity is *Nedivut*, from the root *Nadav*. The first time we find this word in the Torah is when God requests from the people materials to build the Tabernacle. Surprisingly, God makes the people's contribution a choice, "*Me-eit kol ish asher yidbeinu libo*," from every one who's heart generously moves him." With whole chapters of details dedicated to building the sanctuary, you would think the request would be more prescriptive. But this brilliant strategy transforms the act from an obligation into a gift, and the Israelites are deeply moved. Their opportunity to give freely only makes them want to give more. They eagerly offer their gold and silver, fine linens, ram's skins and precious stones—their most treasured belongings that they have carried out with them from Egypt. Moses finally has to plead with them to stop. It is

thought that it's not the sanctuary itself, but rather this collective act of generosity, that helps to make the people into a *kehilah kedoshah*, a holy community.

Why this focus in Judaism on the giver rather than the gift? Why the Jewish proverb that when we give to others, the giver gets more than the recipient? I believe it's because this is not really about the exchange of money or precious materials. Generosity is a whole way of being. It comes out in the way we speak and listen, how we spend our time, our mood. It's expressed in the way we see the world, other people and even ourselves. I'd like to explore with you, today, *Nedivut*, the Jewish soul-trait of generosity, and how essential it is in our lives.

The story of the Tabernacle makes generosity seem easy. But if you want a reminder of how hard it can be, come spend a few hours in my home. My seven-year-old girl and two-six-year-old boys are obsessed with whether they have been shorted one french fry, or whether one of them gave away their fidget spinner to the other, or if it was just a loan. Arguments and fights are frequent occurrences. Just forget that there are always leftover french fries, and that we have a drawer full of fidget spinners. One of the difficulties of generosity, especially with material things, is the fear that there will not be enough.

We hope that all our children outgrow this extreme false sense of scarcity. But in Genesis, we have a tragic story of it tearing a family apart. The twin brothers, Jacob and Esau, grow up in a struggle over which one of them will receive the blessing from their father, Isaac. Since Esau managed to emerge first from the womb, with Jacob grasping at his heel, the blessing is his. The whole family is sucked into the competition over this one blessing. Rebecca schemes to help Jacob steal it. Now, the moment arrives: Jacob slips out after tricking his father and receiving the blessing meant for Esau, and then Esau enters Isaac's tent. Isaac trembles, and Esau wails, "Bless me too, father!" Isaac responds, "Your brother came with guile and has taken away your blessing." But finally, Esau cries out one last time, pointing to the injustice of the whole situation. "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" Isaac reaches deep within and offers Esau a blessing.

A second blessing! Why did this family live those years believing there was only one? How could this knowledge have changed these four souls, and the bond between Esau and Jacob, who will now go twenty years before they see each other again? If only Isaac had understood, before all this strife, that there was enough blessing for everyone. Living with generosity means taking a leap of faith that despite our fears, there will be enough: enough resources, enough food and space, enough potential and even enough love, to be happy. We need to balance our responsibility to protect what we have with the understanding that our efforts at self-preservation can get in the way of our human need to share, to welcome and bring others into our circle.

When I think about what living a life of generosity demands of us, the first precious resource, and for many of us the hardest one to feel we can spare, is our time. We all know how busy we are and how many things are on our minds. And, when we have time to spare, we are under pressure to guard it protectively. Still, the resource we have that is the most powerful when we share it is our time. Time spent with another person gives the gift of affirmation and value. And time spent attending to the needs of others, as the Jewish teaching says, can be as good for us as it is for the recipient.

Our matriarch Rebecca is the best example of this. When Abraham's servant is sent to search for a wife for Isaac, he sets up a test. He takes his place near the local well, and he vows that Isaac's future wife will be the first woman who, when she comes to the well and he asks her for water, will respond, "Drink, and I will water your camels as well." Rebecca proves to be this woman. Like us, she is not exactly free in that moment. She has her own duties to perform back at her father's house. But she doesn't hesitate. She seizes this opportunity to act with generosity.

To me, Rebecca's wisdom is remembering, even in midst of the pressures of our lives, that we have the option to resist those pressures for a moment and respond to other people's needs. The Hebrew word for volunteering is *hitnadvut*. It's a reflexive form of *nadav*, the root for generosity, so it means, to offer yourself. We offer ourselves when we take the time to see a sick friend in the hospital, because we know how meaningful that personal visit will be. We offer ourselves when we put down what

we're doing and listen to our friend, our spouse or our child. We offer ourselves when we put our own concerns aside and focus on what someone else is thinking about. We offer ourselves when we are able to turn towards another person, and say, "*Hineini*." I am here. I am here, for you.

Asking us to put aside our concerns, or to give up hours of our lives in today's world, is expecting a lot. Of course, we cannot and should not say yes all the time. More than the question of saying yes or saying no, the concept of *Nedivut* is about a generosity of spirit. In this way, generosity is not just about what we choose to give away or how we spend our time, but about our whole orientation to the world. Our society is structured against *Hitnadvut*, offering ourselves. We learn in the workplace that when we enter a meeting or begin an important conversation, we need to be clear on what we want to get out of it. What is our objective. But generosity means that when we enter into an exchange, equally important is what we have to offer: our help, our respect, our care, our counsel, our honesty, even our presence.

There's a story about a father and son in Siberia, who were so poor they had only one coat. Every day, they argued over who needed it more. The father would say, "You're in the field working up a sweat all day! That should keep you warm." And the son would respond, "You're inside. At least you have some shelter from the wind." They took their dilemma to the rabbi. The rabbi didn't know what to tell them, and he asked them to come back in three days. On the way home, the father and the son both began to realize the merit of the other's claim. By the time they returned, they were now each insisting the other use the coat. The rabbi said, "Give me a moment." He went to his closet and came back with another coat. The two men were ecstatic and grateful, and began to leave. But as they reached the door, the son asked the rabbi why he hadn't just given them the coat three days ago. The rabbi said, "When you were arguing that you each needed your coat, I thought to myself that I also needed my coat. But when you returned with each one wanting to manage without the coat, I thought, well, I could also manage without mine."

This story is not so much about the necessity of belongings. It's about how our own generosity can create the space where others can be giving as well. But I see another meaning in the story. It's about compassionate judgment and the ability to appreciate the needs of another. It's about our seeing another person as worthy of what we have to give.

The soul trait of *nedivut* is important in the way we perceive and judge others. The Talmud suggests, "When you judge anyone, tip the scale in his or her favor." We can think of this as an act of generosity. All of us have done something wrong and wished others would be a little more generous in judging us.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav taught that one reason we should do this is because if we judge a person harshly, they may be too discouraged to try to change. I love this teaching. It allows us to see our judgments as an opportunity to help another person do *teshuvah*, or repentance—not by rebuking them or counseling them, but simply by judging them favorably and treating them kindly.

Rabbi Alan Morinis tells the story of a woman who used generosity to help her with a relationship at work. She and her colleague rubbed each other the wrong way. They had different styles and priorities, and they saw the world differently. Their relationship was tense with constant disagreement. She asked herself if she could come to the relationship with a generosity of spirit – not always having always to be right, and not feeling like she had to change this person. She asked herself "to be generous enough to give her colleague's way of being in the world space to operate."<sup>2</sup>

This woman used generosity to soften the atmosphere of judgment that surrounded her and her coworker. Jewish texts on *nedivut* include teachings that one should not be too exact in measurements, should be relaxed in business, lend to the poor, and, if one can, also to the rich.<sup>3</sup> In other words, we should try not to think too much about what's right, or fair. When we can, judge less and give more.

In Torah, what better place to look for this kind of *nedivut* than, again, at Jacob and Esau. They spent their childhood judging each other and fighting over what each believed only he deserved. Twenty years later, Jacob hears that Esau is approaching

with an army of soldiers. He wrestles overnight with his fear and his guilt, and he finally faces Esau, expecting to be attacked by his angry and envious brother.

But Esau has changed. When he looks at Jacob, he doesn't see his lying and scheming rival. Instead, he sees his beloved twin brother, with whom he shared his whole childhood. Jacob has never sought his forgiveness, all these years. But Esau chooses to extend it to him. He embraces him. Jacob has brought pastures full of gifts—hundreds of camels, bulls, rams goats and other livestock—hoping to buy his brother's mercy. But Esau looks at them and says, "I have enough, my brother." Instead of seeking restitution, he offers love. Jacob, who has been ready to beg for his life, is swept up in the generosity his brother has brought. He looks at Esau and says, "Seeing you is like seeing the face of God."

The High Holy Days are a time of judgment and confession. They are also a time of forgiveness, which is an act of giving. We come here to acknowledge our human frailty and our faults, and to forgive others for the ways their imperfections have hurt us. When we have done wrong, it's not because we set out to act hurtfully. It's because we are weak, and there are moments when we have failed to live up to our ideals. Our liturgy is full of generosity towards us, assuring us that God is gracious and will answer us.

Yom Kippur also asks us to offer each other *Nedivut*. We forgive those who have wronged us, because it helps us, and because it helps them. We forgive ourselves for our own transgressions. We remind ourselves that generosity builds tabernacles, communities and relationships. We remind ourselves that there is enough blessing for everyone. We remind ourselves that a spirit of generosity creates more of everything: more encouragement, more appreciation, more happiness and more love. As we close the High Holy Days today and tomorrow, let's be ready to enter the new year with a new spirit of *nedivut*; ready to open ourselves up to those around us; ready to give.

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, p, 160

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Orchot Tzadikim*, 15<sup>th</sup> Century [https://www.sefaria.org/Orchot\\_Tzadikim.16-17?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Orchot_Tzadikim.16-17?lang=bi)