

needy or “homeless” person), the stranger (who is needy for different reasons than the Levite), the orphan (who lacks a caretaker), and the widow (who lacks a provider). These God calls “Mine.” And, says Rashi, this is the deal that God proposes: “If you make My four happy, then I will see to it that your four rejoice.” Since God’s interests lie with the poor, by investing in them we will collect huge dividends from Him, as the Talmud states:

A person can bring a special gift to a king, but the king might not accept it from him. And even if the king does accept the gift, this does not guarantee that the person will be permitted to enter to see the king. But God does not act that way. If a person gives a contribution to the poor, he merits a revelation of God [even in this world] (*Bava Batra* 10a).

The commentaries point out that just as the revelation of God is a private experience, this also applies to one who gives discreetly to the poor so as not to embarrass them or to use the act for self-aggrandizement. So use your imagination. Just by giving a small gift to the poor, we merit to experience God! Not a bad investment. Not at all. The Talmud continues:

Rabbi Yochanan said: What is the meaning of the verse “One who shows mercy to the poor is a lender to God”? (*Proverbs* 19:17). Were this verse not recorded, we would never be able to make such a statement. Scripture makes it clear that if we donate to the poor, it is considered as if we are lending money to God! God actually becomes the Borrower from the donor—as if He has signed a promissory note Himself to return that money (*Maharsha on Bava Batra* 10a). What better assurances or guarantees does one need in lending money, when it is common knowledge that the Debtor always has the means to return the loan?!

So far, we have seen that investing with God provides the means of rejoicing in our families, experiencing a Divine revelation, and becoming God’s creditor. And there’s more—a lot more.

## OPENING DOORS

The power of charity is absolutely phenomenal. It can open the gates of great yearning so that we desire to serve God constantly. Through charity, we can draw upon ourselves such an influx of God’s kindness that we will no longer have to struggle to make money. A blessing of kindness will descend, bringing abundance for all. In

short, giving to charity can break open all barriers, including the obstacles and difficulties we experience while earning a livelihood.

In one of his longer lessons, Rebbe Nachman speaks of charity as the counterforce to the challenges and frustrations that we face on a daily basis (see *Kitzur Likutey Moharan* II, 4). He teaches how, through giving charity, we can merit to see Divine Providence and to bring about the healing of all ailments.

The Rebbe emphasizes that all beginnings are difficult. In all our devotions, *mitzvot*, good deeds and efforts toward repentance, we must necessarily surmount enormous difficulties and obstacles. Just as a woman giving birth must undergo the travails of labor before she can bring her child into the world, we, too, must first experience the “labor pains” of anything we wish to give birth to. The hardest part is beginning, making that first opening, which is why the Torah states: “Open (*PaTo’aCh tiftach*) your hand generously.” Charity is called an opening (*PeTaCh*). It is the “first” opening—the one that widens all the cracks and opens all the other doors. Therefore the verse uses the verb for “open” twice: *pato’ach tiftach*. Charity opens all the doors and creates all the opportunities.

In this vein, Rebbe Nachman teaches:

The principal spiritual work involved in giving charity is for a person to break his cruelty and transform it into mercy, whereupon he then donates his money to charity. For a person who is compassionate by nature and who gives charity out of his innate compassion has not really performed the devotion of giving charity. Therefore all who are benevolent and who wish to properly perform the mitzvah of charity must first pass through this stage. Namely, they must first break their natural cruelty and transform it into mercy to give charity, because this is the essence of the spiritual work of giving charity. When a person does this, God’s anger is also transformed into goodwill.

The “cruelty” one needs to break lies in his dealings with his family (*Parparaot LeChokhmah* II, 4). Of course, we wish to give charity, but our “compassion” is diverted to our family’s needs. After all, they must eat and drink, they must be clothed, and they must be housed properly. Since our primary obligation is to them, it becomes very difficult to part with our money in order to help the poor. We must

conquer our “cruelty,” which emanates from our “compassion” for our kin. Then our charity is real charity.

Charity widens all the openings into holiness. In other words, when a person enters a particular pathway or devotion in the service of God, he must then create an opening there, by which to enter into that pathway... Through charity, one widens the opening. And even when an opening already exists, charity greatly widens and opens up all the openings into holiness. Therefore, before commencing any mitzvah or religious devotion, it is good to give charity so as to widen the opening into holiness that a person must make with his devotion. This way, it will not be so difficult and onerous for him to enter.

The beginning of charity, like all beginnings, is extremely difficult (*Mekhlita, BaChodesh 2*). Just what we must do to satisfy our physical needs—even the bare necessities like food, drink, clothing and shelter—hinder us tremendously in our service of God. Through charity, all of these hindrances disappear, and we can earn our livelihood without any effort. Indeed, when God’s lovingkindness encompasses us in the merit of giving charity, we need not involve ourselves in any sort of business or labor at all. Instead, our work is done for us by others.

It is impossible to receive abundant lovingkindness, because people in general cannot receive an overabundance of good. Thus a person must create a vessel and conduit with which to receive this lovingkindness. Through fear and awe of God, a vessel and conduit is created by which to receive lovingkindness.

So far, the Rebbe has taught that charity opens doors for us all. When we overcome our initial reservations and conquer our innate cruelty and miserliness, our charity opens the doors to a multitude of opportunities that are now available to us. Not only does charity open doors, it also widens those doorways and pathways, enabling us to enter through the open door and walk steadily on our chosen path. This applies to everything in life—marriage, children, work, and so on. All our necessities become easier to attain because our efforts are aided and abetted by our charitable deeds.

Even more, all our work is considered Divine work, as the *Zohar* (I, 88a) states: “An arousal from below evokes a similar arousal from above.” If we engage in constructive labor, God will provide His own

“construction”—or “new creation”—opening up brand-new doors and pathways to provide us with our needs, be they physical or spiritual. Furthermore, when we give charity, we merit that God will shower His lovingkindness upon us.

But sometimes when we give to charity, this lovingkindness is not forthcoming and is held back by Heaven. This can be traced to a lack of proper vessels within which to receive God’s blessings. These vessels are constructed when we serve God with the proper awe and reverence. How do we achieve this? Rebbe Nachman continues:

The revelation that everything happens in accordance with God’s will, and that there is no such thing as [independent] natural forces, results in the fear of God. The reason is that at the time, people know that there is such a thing as reward and punishment, and as such, there is cause to fear God. But when people fall into heresy, such as [believing that] everything proceeds only according to the laws of nature, then fear of God is an irrelevant concept.

### THE THREE FESTIVALS

At this point, Rebbe Nachman introduces one of the major teachings of Chassidut: the “will of God.”

According to the Kabbalah, “will” parallels Keter (Crown), the highest of spiritual energies. God’s will represents Divine favor and contains all the goodness that we can possibly receive. The more we invest our efforts in revealing this Divine will, the greater degree of lovingkindness we can expect. (This is because we have invoked God’s will of our own accord and initiated the process of a “new creation,” as just explained.) The obstacles that we face in revealing God’s will are of our own making. If we do not recognize that Divine Providence sets the pace of our lives, but mistakenly credit natural laws, then instead of revealing this Divine will, we conceal it. As Rebbe Nachman explains, when we invoke God’s will—when we accept that it is His world and that He directs it as He chooses—we become aware of the consequences of not following His will and arouse within ourselves fear of God.

This revelation of God’s will [i.e., that everything happens only because God wills it] comes about through the Festivals. This is because each of the holy Festivals proclaims, announces and reveals God’s

will—namely, that it is God’s will alone that directs all things and the laws of nature govern nothing at all.

For on each and every one of the Festivals, God performed awesome wonders for us that directly contradict the laws of nature. At Pesach, the Exodus from Egypt occurred, when God brought us out of Egypt amidst awesome wonders. On Shavuot, the Giving of the Torah took place, when God gave us the Torah amidst awesome wonders. On Sukkot, [we recall] the Clouds of Glory that surrounded [the Jews in the desert]. All of these awesome signs and wonders that God did for us on each of the Three Festivals reveal that everything occurs exclusively through God’s will, and that natural forces really determine nothing at all.

But a person must carefully incline his ear and his heart so as to hear the sound of this holy proclamation, and then he will be worthy of rejoicing on the Festivals. For each person, commensurate with how well he hears in his heart the proclamation of the Festivals—namely, that everything occurs exclusively through God’s will—thereby merits to experience the joy of the Festivals.

The Torah calls the Festivals *mikra’ei kodesh*, which literally means “call of the sacred” (Leviticus 23:4). Rebbe Nachman explains that the nature of these Festivals “calls out” to the Jewish people to remember that God governs the forces of nature and that they are subject to His will. How much we are willing to “listen” to that call determines how much we can merit seeing the revelation of God’s will.

What stops us from hearing that call? Rebbe Nachman continues:

There exist dangerous, predatory “animals.” These are the professors and proponents of the theories of natural determinism, who wish to demonstrate with their flawed wisdom that everything occurs according to the laws of nature. These animals have preyed upon and devoured many of our people. For many Jewish souls have sunken in this heresy—and these souls are like birds caught in a snare.

Therefore anyone who has pity on his soul must flee and escape from these animals so that his soul should not be rent and devoured by them. For the onslaught of these animals is very powerful indeed, and the noise of their roaring rises up and drowns out the call of the Festivals which proclaims, shouts out and reveals God’s will. Therefore, God forbid that anyone should look at all at those books that enter into philosophical or scientific inquiries of this sort.

When the elders of the generation lack perfection, these theories of natural determinism thereby gain power. The explanation for this is that each person must add on additional holiness and knowledge of God with each additional day of his life, and each successive day must radiate more than the last with holiness and knowledge of God. Only a person who does this can truly be called a “holy elder.” But when a person blemishes the days of his life and does not add on holiness and knowledge each day, even though he is growing older, he is not called an “elder” at all. To the contrary, he is said to be short-lived.

The holy call of the Festivals is countered by the call of the “wild beasts” who continuously espouse the theories of natural causes, drowning out the sacred call that proclaims the will of God. By fleeing from encounters with proponents of a natural order, we are better able to hear the sacred call to seek Divine Providence.

Rebbe Nachman explains further that at the top of the hierarchy of the philosophers whom he calls “animals” and “unholy elders” stands someone who intentionally tries to block the sacred call. The philosophers themselves, though formidable, can be countered, because they indulge in their views out of lusts—greed, immorality, the craving for honor and recognition, and so forth. But the one who stands at the top of this hierarchy challenges God out of spite and defiance against His will. The Rebbe refers to this person as the *metzach ha-nachash* (literally, “forehead of the serpent”). Because of his brazenness to defy God, he is considered the root of all evil and defiance of God’s will. This person is extremely difficult to defeat, because he seeks neither honor nor lust. His whole *raison d’être* is to deny God’s existence and His will. How can we overcome such evil?

The answer is by giving charity. Charity rectifies the imperfection of the unholy elders, which in turn nullifies the root of the natural philosophies and makes it possible to hear the proclamation of the Festivals which call out and reveal God’s will—namely, that everything is determined by God’s will alone. Rebbe Nachman recommends that we give much charity before each of the Festivals in order to experience the joy of the Festivals to the fullest. And when we merit to hear the call of the Festivals proclaiming and revealing God’s will, we will attain fear of God. This fear of God enables us to receive God’s lovingkindness, and then we will not have to do any

kind of labor for our livelihood. All our work will be performed by others and we will be able to engage in the service of God with no financial worries.

Thus it is evident that the benefit of charity is very great indeed, both for oneself—in that it enables a person to engage unimpeded in the service of God—and for the world as a whole—in that faith in God’s will is thereby revealed in the world. Then the souls that are already caught in the theories of natural determinism, like birds caught in a snare, will fly out from their traps and escape to safety, all as a result of charity.

Sometimes even when a person suppresses the proponents of natural determinism, they still come back and raise doubts as to the absolute predominance of God’s will. Then it is necessary to once again give much charity, because charity consistently suppresses and subdues their theories, and it reveals that everything occurs exclusively through God’s will.

Rebbe Nachman concludes this lesson with the statement “Charity is a cure for all ailments.” He explains that any illness is basically an infection that causes the blood cells to engulf a specific place in the body. A cure sends antibodies to that place to fight off the infection, but as long as the infection remains, the person is unwell. We must make an opening to allow the infection to drain from the body—that is, we need a surgical procedure. Giving charity parallels surgery, as it helps open the wound and drain the “infection” to begin the process of healing.

#### CHARITY REMAINS FOREVER

The Ari says that when a person performs a mitzvah, the letters associated with that mitzvah become inscribed on his forehead and illuminate his face. Conversely, when one commits a transgression, the letters associated with that transgression appear on his forehead. Each time a person commits a mitzvah or a transgression, it is inscribed on his forehead and is then wiped clean when the next act is done. The exception to this rule is the mitzvah of charity, which remains etched on the forehead, as it is written, “Charity remains forever” (Psalms 111:3).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Pri Etz Chaim, Sha'ar Shabbat 4*, p. 388; *Sha'ar Ruach HaKodesh*, p. 18.

The Hebrew word for forehead is *metzach*. When speaking of the realms of holiness and the revelation of God’s will, the Kabbalah uses the term *metzach ha-ratzon* (literally, “forehead of Divine favor”). As we have just seen, Rebbe Nachman teaches that there is a power of impurity that subscribes to the destructive forces of atheism, known as the *metzach ha-nachash* (forehead of the serpent). This *metzach ha-nachash* draws its strength from people who live long lives but do not fill their days with holiness. Atheism festers and grows stronger as these people live on.

The antithesis of the *metzach ha-nachash* is the *metzach ha-ratzon*, the forehead of Divine favor. This counters the long life of the *metzach ha-nachash* and parallels the Divine persona known as *Arieh Anpin* (Extended Countenance), a term that implies the longevity of the forces of holiness. Since the power of the *metzach ha-ratzon* is drawn from a long life filled with Divine favor, it can overpower the *metzach ha-nachash* and the forces of atheism.

Rebbe Nachman teaches that charity arouses the power of the *metzach ha-ratzon* to overcome the *metzach ha-nachash*. This is because charity connotes long life, as it is written, “Cast your bread upon the waters, for you shall find it in many days” (Ecclesiastes 11:1). Giving charity invokes “many days”—the Extended Countenance. The *metzach ha-ratzon* is then empowered to protect us from the challenges of atheism.

Reb Noson adds that one of the greatest kinds of charity is that given to the righteous poor who follow the teachings of the tzaddikim and thus counter the teachings of the *metzach ha-nachash*. Even greater is the charity given to those who publish new Torah insights based on the teachings of the true tzaddikim. For these Torah teachings spread the *da’at* of the tzaddikim all over the world, countering the evil influence of the proponents of the natural order and helping to reveal Divine Providence. This is charity that truly remains forever! (*Likutey Halakhot, Birkhot HaShachar* 5:35). This accords with the Ari’s teaching that the mitzvah of giving charity remains inscribed on the forehead, making charity the key to the power of the *metzach ha-ratzon*.

Such is the awesome power of charity, a mitzvah that remains indelibly engraved upon a person—forever!

Moshe Chenkes was one of the community leaders in Breslov who had welcomed Rebbe Nachman to the town. He became quite close to the Rebbe, through whose blessing his business prospered. He became extremely wealthy, but he had no children. He asked the Rebbe to give him a blessing for children, but the Rebbe told him that the reason he was childless was because he had been the victim of theft—a former business partner had stolen money from him, and “stealing a person’s money is like stealing his wife and children” (*Likutey Moharan* I, 69). Shortly before Rebbe Nachman passed away, he said to Reb Noson, “If Moshe [Chenkes] divorces his present wife, he’ll be able to have children.”

At first Moshe Chenkes was uninterested in divorcing his wife. But one time when he met Reb Noson after morning prayers, the latter urged him, “Just as I am wearing *talit* and *tefilin*, Rebbe Nachman said, ‘You will have children!’” A few years later, Moshe Chenkes’ wife agreed to a divorce. She asked for half his wealth, which he gave her, and then she married his former partner.

Moshe Chenkes remarried Elki, sister of the Rav of Tomoshpiel, yet a few years passed and there was still no sign of children. Occasionally Moshe Chenkes would complain to Reb Noson, “After all, you’re the one who told me to divorce.” Finally, in about 1816, Reb Noson told him, “Go to Uman and complain to the Rebbe at his *tziyun* (grave). Say to the Rebbe, ‘I did as you told me through Reb Noson. I divorced my first wife. Where is the promise that I’ll have children from my second wife? It’s already a few years since I remarried and there is still no sign of children!’”

Moshe Chenkes went to Uman and prayed at the Rebbe’s grave. Upon leaving the *tziyun*, the first thought that came to his mind was “Sow for yourselves seeds of charity” (Hosea 10:12). At that moment, he felt as if Rebbe Nachman himself was standing next to him saying the verse. Upon returning to Breslov, Moshe Chenkes gave generously to charity. He was blessed with a daughter and a son.