

If there will be among you a needy man... you shall not make your heart unfeeling and not close up your hand to your brother, the needy man. (15:7)

Literally, the translation of this *pasuk* is: "You shall not do violence to your heart." **Horav S. R. Hirsch, zl**, observes that the Torah is teaching us that Jews are, by nature, good-hearted and sensitive towards others. It is, therefore, assumed that if Jewish hearts are permitted to give free rein to their natural impulses, they will do good. On the other hand, the individual who does not act with feeling and consideration is selfish and calculating, going against his true-self. Jewish hands are also, by nature, open to the poor and are closed up only by unnatural selfishness. As a result, the Torah admonishes us not to close our hand. Not to give *tzedakah*, charity, going against our grain, overcoming our natural prosperity to act correctly, with feeling and compassion for the betterment of others.

The heart wants to give. The brain looks at the situation from a rational perspective. The mind feels that each individual should fend for himself. From its cold and calculating perch, it views *chesed*, acts of kindness, as an infringement upon oneself: "I worked hard to achieve; no one helped me along the way. Why should he be different?" The heart is the seat of compassion, and the Jew is by nature a *rachaman*, merciful, and a *gomer chesed*, kind-hearted, with a proclivity towards demonstrating kindness towards others. It is to this tug of war that the Torah speaks: "You shall not make your heart unfeeling; rather, you shall open your hand to him."

The Torah does not write, "You shall give" but rather, "You shall open." Our hearts want to give; our minds are attempting to close our hand. The Torah says, "Open that hand;" do what your heart motivates you to do. It is this notion that, throughout the millennia, has produced the wonders of Jewish charity. These acts have designated the Jewish People as the undisputed world leaders of *chesed*. All who are in distress, who are weighed down by various forms of adversity, know that the welcoming address for all sorts of aid is the Jewish People.

We must underscore that charity and *tzedakah* are not on the same plane. *Tzedakah* is not acting out of benevolence, compassion, or generosity. It means doing what is right and just. One is executing his duty as a Jew. There are those who give out of a sense of guilt. They have been inordinately blessed with material bounty. Thus, they feel compelled to split the pot with others. This is not why we give. There are those who feel that what they have is theirs by right. They have worked for it, but they will be noble and kind and give a little to others. This is not why we give. We give neither out of nobility of heart, nor to expiate our guilt for having more than others.

We believe neither that material wealth is criminal, nor that being poor is a curse. One who is wealthy is blessed and should consider himself G-d's agent to disperse funds to those in need. He has been given an awesome privilege and an even greater responsibility. By creating a world consisting of "haves" and "have nots," Hashem allows people who give *tzedakah* to emulate His

ways, thereby becoming His partners in Creation. When one rejects the poor man's petition, as a result, he disdains Hashem's choice of him as a benefactor of others. Likewise, the one who is the beneficiary of *tzedakah* should not feel like a second-class citizen. He is receiving what is rightfully his. In the scheme of Creation, Hashem decided that it was best for him to be on the receiving end of the *tzedakah* experience.

Lo s'amez es levavcha v'lo sikpotz es yadecha: The admonishment not to shut off the feelings of our heart and not to close up our hand is actually a process that evolves throughout one's life. Some of us are precocious and outgrow the clenched fist syndrome early in life, while others, regrettably, take it with them up to their final mortal moments. The *Midrash in Koheles Rabbah* says: "A baby enters the world with hands clenched, as if to say, 'The world is mine; I shall grab whatever I can.' A person leaves this world with his hands open, as if to say, 'I can take nothing with me.'"

When we are young, it is all about "us." We grab at everything, regardless of whom it might inconvenience. As we mature, we develop an awareness of a world outside of ourselves, a world of other people, some of whom are closer to us than others. Throughout the maturing process, we begin to shed our self-centeredness and become givers, rather than takers. I say this in general terms, but one would be naïve to believe that all of us shed the narcissism and self-indulgence that is a product of immaturity. Sometimes the juvenile demands and delusions that "it all belongs to me" – or, at least, it should- remain with us as adults. We still demand that everything revolve around us, as we attempt to grab whatever we can, and clench our fists when we are asked to step up to the plate and help others.

At a certain point in life, when we confront our own mortality, we begin to realize that there are more important things in life than my money, my material possessions, my, my, my. As we grow older, we want less for ourselves and seek to give more to others. Thus, when we prepare to leave the world, the clenched fist has completely opened up. Sadly, for some it is too little, too late.