

Giving: key to spiritual growth

How does a person grow spiritually?

Surviving adversity? Endless hours of studying alone? Hiking into the Grand Canyon to survey the majesty of God's creation from the bottom up?

These may all be wonderful beginnings, agree two rabbis from disparate ends of Jewish tradition. Yet both say the real way to achieve true spiritual growth is much simpler: give a little.

In the act of giving, they say, Jews can achieve the ultimate spiritual goal: becoming more God-like.

Human beings' ability to give and share is a divine gift, says Rabbi Chaim Silver of Young Israel of Phoenix. That gift, he says, is the essence of "the godliness of a human being.

"The physical world is not something that gives," he explains. "The laws of nature run by Darwin-like concepts of the survival of the fittest. Everything in nature wants to define its own boundaries, wants to become more of itself."

God created an *olam chessed*, a world of kindness, in order to allow humanity to "take part in the good he has," Silver says. "In order to build anything, in order to create anything, the foundation has to be kindness."

The giving that comes out of kindness, he says, is the basis of creative energy. "When you give," Silver explains, "it's not just that the other person has consumed that which you gave; it's that the other person now has a part of you in him or her."

Creating through kindness is evocative of God's ultimate gift: the creation of the world, which allows humans to give, Silver says.

"When we give," Rabbi Shoni Labowitz says, "we become the word itself. Compassion is being able to serve, being able to give -- not for reward or self-aggrandizement. Giving itself is the reward.

"Our tradition teaches that we are here to be filled by God. We need to give it over, fulfill that loop -- fill, empty, give again."

Other traditions agree, she says.

"There's a Zen teaching: If you give an empty bowl to the universe, it can fill it. If you give a full rice bowl, nothing happens. In reality, the more you give, the more you get."

Labowitz says the notion of tithing - which began with the obligation to support the temple priests - undergirds these notions. "When you tithe,"

she says, "you get it back ten-fold. It happens not just with money, but with thoughts, words and actions. In Jewish tradition, we're taught that that happens on the inside."

The altruism of giving is the foundation not only of spiritual growth, but of love, says Silver.

The ability to love and form connections with others is an essential part of a holy existence, Labowitz says. "Much of Judaism is based on living in a community. We don't live by ourselves or alone, never alone. Being in a community of kindred spirits helps one more easily walk the path."

Jewish observance is patterned around that, she says. "That's why we get together on Shabbat. We can chant or daven by ourselves, but when we get into a room of kindred souls, that energy is transformative."

The natural give-and-take of interpersonal relationships is a part of growth, Silver adds, pointing out that the root of the Hebrew word for love, ahava, is hav, to give. "True love can only come from giving," he says, pointing out that the notion of "romance" is a Western concept, not a Jewish one. "Romance does not equal love," he says, citing the scene in the musical "Fiddler on the Roof" when Tevye the milkman asks his wife, Golde, "Do you love me?"

In the song, Golde responds, "Do I love you?" and lists the litany of responsibilities she's performed in their 25 years of marriage - washed the clothes, milked the cow, made the bed, given him children. "For 25 years, my bed is his," she concludes. "If that's not love, what is?"

"True love comes when you give up your wants and desires," Silver adds, "when you each give, when you each sacrifice."

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