

A few weeks ago it was the first yartzeit of a former student, and after commenting on a post about it on Facebook his mother added me as a friend. She then sent me a private message and asked how I knew her son. Chatting with her on Facebook was difficult but I think it helped her to hear about another person's experience of her son. Meir was a remarkable young man who was taken from his family, friends, and the larger community much too young. I was his teacher a number of years ago when he was in high school and my memory of him was that he was devoted to his friends, family and to practicing his faith in a way that was remarkable for a young man in high school. His desire to learn all he could about Judaism for he wanted to ultimately become a rabbi, never shifted even as he got sicker. He exemplifies the Mussar middah, or character trait, of *Ruach Nadivah* - generosity of spirit, which I want to explore with you all this morning.

Generosity of spirit is an expression of the quiet leadership which often gets passed by. We all know, whether we want to or not, the leadership of the big tech company CEOs. They are out front, with lights, cameras and screaming crowds. One could confuse them with rock and roll stars. But there is another kind of leadership, the leadership that is felt throughout the room even when the leader is not speaking. Meir was one of those quiet leaders and his leadership arose from his generosity of spirit.

The essence of Mussar is that developing our character traits does not only help us but also helps our interactions with those around us. We all have the potential to improve our lives, and the lives of those around us through cultivating positive character traits. The definition of

“generosity” is “the quality of being kind or generous” - another word for generous is unselfish. People who lead with their essence, who lead with their generosity of spirit, may never be called out as the next CEO or President but they impact the lives of those around them in a positive way. Each one of us has the capability of becoming more generous of spirit and through our actions we can improve both our life and our experiences with those around us whether family, friends, co-workers or strangers. This is similar to the idea of karma, in that what good you put out into the world will come back in another form.

Another way to understand the trait of generosity of spirit is explained by Rabbi Ben Greenberg, “A generosity of spirit is being ready to suspend judgment and accusation in the face of perceived slight and insult and maintain an open heart. This sounds simple but it takes a lot of intentional work to cultivate within the context of community.”¹

Each one of us has a stake in both this community as well as our larger community. The ability to suspend judgment and accusation while maintaining an open heart is a challenge for us all. Rabbi Greenberg challenges us to make ourselves better so we are then able to make our community better through our actions. Those actions come in many different forms, such as the act of giving Tzedakah or visiting the sick. Another is to give of our time and expertise in our community - teaching is one way we can do this. Excellent teachers are role models of generosity of spirit for it is difficult to share knowledge which one finds to be second nature in a patient way. Especially when the teacher recognizes that the student may never have the passion for the topic or subject

¹ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/rabbis-without-borders/generosity-of-spirit/>

in the way the teacher does. One way our community can practice generosity of spirit is to be teachers - either in our religious school or through mentoring children in the community.

Children are our future but it is often hard to reach children who are struggling for many have learned to protect themselves by lashing out at those closest to them.

A story, which also came about with thanks to Facebook. As many of us know, the internet is often not the place for civil discussion. The ability to write a post and not have to respond to the intended party face-to-face gives a type of freedom that leads to many kinds of destructive behavior. For this reason, I often try to not engage online unless there is a way to do so privately. But, over the summer I saw a post about the advances in treatment of children who identify as Transgender followed by a comment written by a person, let us call them Ploni, I knew quite well arguing that parents should not follow the whims of children. Instead of passing the comment by, as I tend to do on social media, I chose to respond to Ploni and explain that actually it is easier and healthier from a medical point of view to use hormone blockers on children prior to the onset of puberty. Ploni responded and we went back and forth as I explained a number of things relating to gender identity and later sexual identity as well. It was not an easy conversation to have because I was pushed on an issue that feels near and dear to my heart. I had to practice generosity of spirit, suspend judgment and continue to work from a place of compassion. It was meaningful to me that at the end of our discussion Ploni thanked me for helping them understand why their first comment was hurtful. Each one of us has opportunities like this one in our day-to-day lives whether they occur on the Internet or IRL - in real life.

I share this story in order to illustrate how it could be if we, each one of us, chose to enter into every conversation and every relationship with the desire to practice generosity of spirit. To remember that one does not have to always be right in order to be in relationship with another, is important. Too often we want to only surround ourselves with people who see us in the best light, who never see us do wrong. It is only in setting aside our ego that we are able to enter into relationships based on generosity of spirit and to recognize that these relationships help us, each one of us, become a better person through the practice of being of a generous spirit.

Being generous of spirit does not always come naturally to us but we can learn from our tradition why it is important to work on ourselves and cultivate this trait in ourselves and those around us.

We are told in Pirke Avot: Ethics of the Fathers, a collection of teachings and sayings, that Hillel taught “one who does not increase, decreases; one who will not study deserves to die...”

Bartinoro² taught in regards to this verse that learning is “lost when it is not increased.”

Maimonides understands the punishment to be “applicable only to the one who will not study at all.” Learning, and applying the learning to one’s life, is important. Our tradition teaches us this and our experiences in life hopefully lead us to believing it as well. In order to be generous of spirit we must be willing to acknowledge that there is often more than one right way. That someone can hold a belief contrary to our own and not be wrong. Our tradition teaches us that we can hold two truths at the same time even when they appear to contradict one another - this is what we need to embrace in order to grow in our generosity of spirit.

² Ovadiah ben Abraham of Bertinoro was a 15th-century Italian rabbi best known for his popular commentary on the Mishnah, commonly known as "The Bartenura".

Another teaching from our tradition comes from the prophet Ezekiel referring to the need for personal growth throughout one's life in 36:26 - "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

What does it mean to have a heart of flesh rather than one of stone? Rabbi Gunther Plaut, z"l, comments on this verse: "*Heart of Flesh*. One that is not dead but alive. In biblical language the heart is considered the seat of intelligence (and the bowels the seat of spirit or emotion). Israel's new heart will provide it with the capacity to understand God's ways and the reason for its own misfortunes."³ Therefore, if we are granted a heart of flesh we are being granted a heart that is alive with intelligence. Practicing generosity of spirit helps us make our hearts ones of flesh rather than ones of stone. It allows us the chance to grow as individuals and as members of a community in our care and compassion for those around us.

In his book, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, journalist Jon Ronson explores the history of shaming and explores what it means to be publicly shamed in today's world. After having researched public shaming in others, and experiencing public shaming himself, Ronson teaches "that the cure for shame is empathy."⁴ If we have empathy for others, if we act on our generosity of spirit, than both us and those who have taken a wrong turn have the opportunity to learn, to grow, and to become better people.

³ Page 1456 Torah Commentary

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I will conclude with this teaching by Rabbi Avraham ben Harambam, who lived in the 10th and 11th centuries.

Generosity is the bestowal of good upon one who has no claim or entitlement of it. To pay a worker his wages or a creditor his debit is not generosity, but fairness and justice. However, giving charity to the poor, bringing guests into the home, and bestowing gifts are acts of generosity.⁵

May we all reflect on how we can be more generous of spirit today and every day. May you all be inscribed in the book of life for a year of health, joy, and peace.

⁵ Morinis, *Every Day, Holy Day*, 66