

PURIM, POVERTY AND PROPRIETY—THREE TALMUDIC STORIES

The Book of Esther tells us that when the Jews of Persia fought off their fellow citizens who attempted to murder them at Haman's behest, Mordechai established the yearly celebration we call Purim, with its distinctive feasting, merrymaking, *mishloach manot*, the commandment to exchange gifts, and *matanot la-eyyonim*, the commandment to give presents to the poor.

One would think that *matanot la-eyyonim* would be a social justice no-brainer. After all, what could be complicated about giving presents to the poor, especially as part of a cathartic communal celebration that brings us all together? In actuality, giving to the poor, on Purim or anytime, can be complicated, as a series of stories from the Talmud seem to imply. All of them are found in the Talmud, Tractate Megillah, 7b. (I've taken the liberty of streamlining the translation to make the stories easier to understand.)

Three Talmudic Stories About Giving Gifts To The Poor On Purim

Rabbi Yosef taught:

To fulfill the Purim requirement of giving gifts to your friends, you must give at least two portions of food to one person.

To fulfill the Purim requirement of giving presents to the poor, you must give at least two gifts to two people.

The first story:

Once, Rabbi Yehudah Nesiyah sent Rabbi Oshaya a Purim gift basket filled with the leg of a calf of the highest quality and a jug of wine!

Rabbi Oshaya wrote him back: “You have fulfilled *through us* (Oshaya and his family) both the commandment to send gifts to your friends *and* the commandment to send gifts to poor people on Purim!”

The second story:

Another time, Rabbah had Abaye take a Purim gift basket filled with a sack of dates and a cup of roasted flour to Mari bar Mar.

Before he left, Abaye told Rabbah, “Now Mari will say about *you*, “Once a poor farmer always a poor farmer!””

Mari bar Mar sent back with Abaye a Purim gift basket filled with ginger and long peppers, a much more expensive and pungent gift.

Before he left, Abaye told Mari, “Now Rabbah will say about *you*, ‘I sent him sweet foods and he sends me back pungent ones?’”

The third story:

Reflecting upon his experience in both houses that very same Purim day, Abaye said the following:

“When I left Rabbah’s house that day, I was full after eating his Purim meal. When I came to Mari’s house to deliver his gift to him, they served me sixty cooked dishes on sixty plates, and I ate sixty portions of food from each of them! The last dish they served me was called pot roast.

I was so hungry I wanted to chew on the dishes! I guess this explains the old saying: ‘The poor man doesn’t realize how hungry he is.’” (Tractate Megillah 7a-b)

At least one later Talmudic commentator sees this entire narrative about Abaye as a Purim Torah: a silly, exaggerative story of things and their opposites intended to make us laugh. It is part of our Purim celebration whose whole point is to remember how we were supposed to die under Haman, but the opposite happened. (Rabbi Shmuel Eidels, *Hiddushei Aggadot Maharsha*, to Tractate Megillah 7b.)

I suggest that the context and content of these stories lends itself to a more serious interpretation. The Talmud begins with a statement in the Mishnah, the oral Torah, about a legal matter: when may gifts to the poor be given to them, specifically if Purim falls during a leap year on the Jewish calendar. It further reminds us that gift giving and sustaining the poor during Purim have their source in the Book of Esther.

We then continue with a story (Story #1) about Rabbi Yehudah Nesiah sending expensive Purim treats to his colleague, Rabbi Oshaya. Rabbi Yehudah, as it were, kills two birds with one stone. His very fancy and plentiful gifts to his friend cover both requirements of Purim: giving your friend at least two gifts, as well as giving at least two poor people (in this instance, Rabbi Oshaya’s

impoverished household) two gifts. Oshaya praises Yehudah for fulfilling both commandments with his very generous gift; but I think that he's doing something else: he seems to be also thanking him for, as it were, sensitively folding his donation to Oshaya's poor family into his gift to Oshaya, his friend and colleague. Further, Yehudah's gift is no ordinary one to be sent to an impoverished person: it is a classy gift of food and wine sent by a wealthy person, which is "fit for a king," even if the king is poor. Yehudah treats Oshaya the poor man as someone of noble status.

In the next story (Story #2), the sage Abaye is sent by his uncle, Rabbah to their much wealthier colleague, Mari bar Mar, to give him a gift for Purim. Rabbah was a poor farmer who rose to rabbinic prominence to become the head of a great Yeshiva in the Babylonian city of Pumbedita. However, his very simple gift to Mari implies that he remained a man of modest, even impoverished means, despite his rise in status. Mari sends a gift back to Rabbah through Abaye which is filled with ginger and long peppers, expensive condiments in that part of the ancient world. I interpret his action generously: Rabbah his colleague sends what he can, and Mari, a wealthier man, sends back the very best, as a way of showing honor to his poorer friend, who once again deserves foods "fit for a king." In fact, without all of Abaye's interior monologue and anxiety, we could

read this story as being about two colleagues who give each other gifts in ways that don't break the tight budget of the first one and that indicate the sensitivity of the second one.

Abaye clearly doesn't see things my way. He frets to his uncle that Mari will disparage Rabbah's simple gift: "Once a poor farmer, always a poor farmer!" It is noteworthy that the literal translation of this line from the Talmud is: "A farmer becomes king, but he still won't take the feedbag off his neck!" In other words, Abaye fears his uncle, now a "king" of sorts as the head of the local academy, will be lampooned by his wealthy colleague for his paltry Purim gift. Abaye continues to fret after Mari hands him the expensive gift intended for his uncle Rabbah: "Great, now my uncle will perceive that you're sending back pungent food items as a "pungent" way of disparaging him for the sweet but in-substantive foods that he sent!"

Abaye's anxiety, I believe, is driven by his hunger, its humiliations and its hankering. As a member of poor Uncle Rabbah's family (Rabbah in fact raised him), Abaye is thinking almost like the kid from the poor side of town who's terrified to go to the wealthier kids' parties, even as he longs for what they possess: his off-brand shoes, cheap sweater and even cheaper birthday present

are eyesores among the other kids' fancier goods. Paraphrasing the prophet, Ezekiel, this is Abaye's *herpat raav*, the humiliation resulting from his poverty. He has no reason to interpret the largesse of others or their inclusiveness as anything other than paternalistic condescension, their actual intentions notwithstanding.

Exacerbating these fears is the apparent intense physical hunger Abaye experiences in his uncle's home. He eats an obscene amount in Mari's wealthy home to compensate for his lack of food, though he is unsated, even to the point of trying to ravenously chew on (Aramaic, *l'meichas*) Mari's dishes. Abaye explains as much when he quotes a local saying: "The poor man doesn't realize how hungry he is." Abaye is so hungry that being around lots of good food makes him compensate for his hunger in ways he could never have imagined while in Uncle Rabbah's house.

These stories follow the seemingly simple rule about *matanot la-evyonim* on Purim to make a complex observation. Poverty often (though not always) robs its victims of their dignity. It is simply not enough to provide for indigent people's physical needs. Judaism demands that we provide for their emotional and spiritual needs as well, including creating ways of presenting our support as gifts which we bestow with deep respect to our fellow human beings worthy of our

every respect. This is why the Jewish philosopher Maimonides' eight levels of Tzedakah, or charity, a compilation of Talmudic rulings on charitable giving, demand that all giving be done kindly, respectfully, and with an eye toward the recipient's self-worth. During Purim and year-round, as we dig deeper and deeper into our pockets to help the downtrodden, let's remember to do that digging with a sensitive eye and ear toward their dignity.

Shabbat shalom.