

THE JEWISH GIFT OF GIVING

“Purim is the nearest thing Judaism has to a carnival,” Herman Wouk once wrote, a holiday whose “keynote...is riotous rejoicing.” (This is My God, pg. 77) It is a holiday Jews define overwhelmingly by its emphasis on joy, drinking, laughter and celebration of overcoming the forces that sought to destroy them.

That is why village Jews...observe the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and make it a day of merrymaking and feasting, and as a holiday and an occasion for sending gifts to one another. (Esther 9:19)

Feasting (seudat Purim) and gift-giving to friends and family (mishloach manot), are two of the central commandments of Purim day, and they are natural responses to salvation. What makes it a holiday isn't the merrymaking and festivities alone, however; it is the giving. Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, Rabbi Emeritus at Congregation Kehilath Jeshrun in New York City, highlighted the fact that while the Jews' immediate response was jubilation and celebration, Mordechai made tzedaka, charity, essential to the day going forward.



Mordecai recorded these events. And he sent dispatches to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Ahasuerus, near and far, charging them to observe the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar, every year...They were to observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another AND PRESENTS TO THE POOR. (Esther 9:20-22)

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As a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court (Megillah 13b), Mordechai had the authority to establish Purim as an official holiday and include matanot le'evyonim, gifts to those in need, as a commandment of the day. "The Jews accordingly assumed as an obligation that which they had begun to practice and what Mordechai prescribed for them." (Esther 9:23) This, Rabbi Lookstein explained, showed that while Purim was a celebratory day, it wasn't a Jewish holiday until it included charity. In his code of Jewish law, Maimonides, a 10th-century rabbi, wrote the following:

When a person eats and drinks [in celebration of any holiday], they are obligated to feed converts, orphans, widows, and others who are destitute and poor. In contrast, a person who locks the gates of his courtyard and eats and drinks with his children and his wife, without feeding the poor and the embittered, is [not indulging in] rejoicing associated with a mitzvah, but rather the rejoicing of his gut. (Mishneh Torah Laws of Rest on Holidays 6:18)

On Purim specifically, Maimonides wrote regarding the commandment to give charity that:

It is preferable for a person to be more liberal with their donations to the poor than to be lavish in their preparation of the Purim feast or in sending gifts to friends. For there is no greater and more splendid happiness than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the converts. (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Megillah and Hanukkah 2:17)

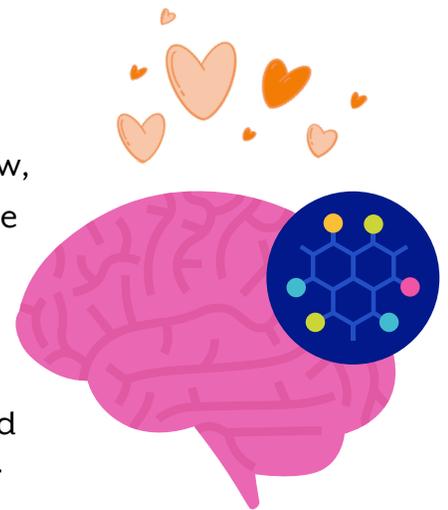
When we are truly joyful, Maimonides asserted, we should want to share that joy and good fortune with others, and that in turn increases our own. Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna taught that in Hebrew the word for "give," נתן, is a palindrome. When one gives they also receive, which is a theory confirmed by modern psychology.

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A recent study funded by the Women’s Philanthropy Institute found that charitable giving is linked to greater life satisfaction, with higher percentages of income given associated with increased satisfaction. Similarly, a 2008 study by researchers from Harvard and the University of British Columbia found that spending money on others leads to lasting improvements in overall happiness.

Neurochemically, drinking alcohol and giving charity actually activate overlapping brain chemicals – including dopamine, endorphins and serotonin – that greatly enhance one’s mood. But while alcohol artificially stimulates these systems, generosity engages them naturally through meaningful connection and purpose, producing higher levels of oxytocin.

“Oxytocin, ‘the cuddle hormone’, is among the most ancient of our neurochemicals and has a powerful effect on the brain and the body,” wrote Dr. Eva Ritvo on Psychology Today. When oxytocin begins to flow, “bonding increases, social fears are reduced and trust and empathy are enhanced.” Oxytocin is unique to human connections; we experience it when we connect or have a meaningful attachment to others. Together, generosity produces dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin – also known as the happiness trifecta – which is connected to improved mood, sleep, digestion, memory, learning and motivation. “The higher your levels of oxytocin, the more you want to help others.”



Perhaps Mordechai prescribed giving on Purim because he knew the holiday wouldn’t be enjoyable enough without it.

Make sure to dedicate some time to thinking of different ways you can give back to your community.

