

Me Too!

Is there a limit to altruism?

By Mendel Kalmenson

It was March 4, 1973, and the meeting between the Rebbe and the Young Leadership Cabinet was nearly over. The Rebbe was emphasizing the importance of activism in the realm of Jewish education, when, to the amazement of the assembled, he concluded:

“I am not asking you for a check. What I am asking from every one of you is that, before asking someone for a check tomorrow, you become ‘more Jewish’ than [you were] today, by adding at least one mitzvah in your personal life, in your private life, and in the life of your family.

“Additionally—and I know this from my personal experience—I am now seventy years old, and nevertheless I hope that tomorrow morning I will be a better Jew than today.

“Performing a mitzvah in your private life, as a private person, has an immediate impact on your communal activities.”



Spiritual Philanthropy

The priests in the Holy
Temple
are often seen as a symbol of selflessness

It can be said that life is one long process of de-selfish-ization.

We all enter this world as self-centered little beings, and hopefully, through much work, by the time we're ready to leave it, we've learned to place others at its center.

One of the Torah's chief objectives is to help us in that process. As one Talmudic sage put it, loving your fellow as yourself is the entire Torah; the rest is simply commentary.¹

The priests in the Holy Temple are often seen as a symbol of selflessness, sacrificing themselves on the altar of community service, completely dedicating their lives to the needs of the people.

Their sacrifice is multidimensional, including, most notably, their willingness to help those who are indifferent to the purity which they, the priests, embody.

The most difficult act of sacrifice any priest was asked to do was participating in the preparation of the red heifer's ashes.

For while the red heifer formula, properly administered, brought purification to those most impure, paradoxically, it rendered impure those priests involved in its production.² And, for an advocate and representative of purity, becoming impure goes against his very being and existence.

The lesson here is revolutionary: Judaism's idea of sacrifice includes spiritual sacrifice too.

The priest is asked to leave behind not just the comforts of home and work, but his idealism and accompanying self-image as well. Worse, he is asked to don, if only temporarily, the very spirit of impurity he spends his life trying to eradicate.

He is asked to willingly become the enemy—just in order to redeem another from captivity.³

(Obviously, one cannot compromise *any* of the laws of the Torah in order to assist another. However, in areas of elective spirituality and holiness, one can—and must—put aside personal development in order to help another.)

Holy Selfishness

Remember to give some of yourself to you

Appropriately, it is the very biblical passage (about the red heifer) which broadens the nature and extent of self-sacrifice, that also puts the necessary cap on its head.

The ashes of each red heifer was divided into three portions.

- One portion was used to purify the impure.
- The second portion was put aside, to be used as part of the process of producing the next batch of ashes.
- The third portion was bottled away “for the assembly of Israel as a safekeeping”—whatever that means. (“This part was put away as safekeeping by *scriptural*

decree.”⁴)

It has been suggested that, homiletically, this “safekeeping” was aimed at protecting an idea (more than the substance representing it).

The idea is this:

By all means, give all of yourself away, like the priest.

But remember to give some of yourself to you.

Just because you’re a priest, devoting your life to purifying others, doesn’t mean that your purity doesn’t matter.

You, too, deserve to be pure.

And just because you are ready to completely sacrifice your own spiritual development in order to help others with theirs, that doesn’t mean that G-d is ready to accept that sacrifice.

In other words: You can only give something away if you own it. And the pleasure that G-d has from an ongoing relationship with you is something that you simply don’t own.

Thus, one can say, more than the assembly of Israel kept the third portion safe, it’s the (idea behind this) portion that kept the Israelites safe.

Now that’s an idea worth preserving.

What’s in It for Me?

A depressed man visited his psychiatrist numerous times, to no avail.

“Doctor, all of your advice has amounted to nothing . . .” he complained.

Let’s stop feeling guilty about living

“Here’s my parting advice,” said the doctor. “In town there’s a successful clown by the name of Coco. He’s always making people happy. Why don’t you speak to him?”

“But, Doctor,” the man said dejectedly, “I am Coco the Clown . . .”

Or another joke:

“My mom is a typical Jewish mother. Once she was on jury duty. They sent her home. She insisted that *she* was guilty.”

Let's stop feeling guilty about living.

The few moments we have to ourselves, we should *keep to ourselves*.

Let's learn from the wisdom aired on planes: "Make sure your oxygen mask is secure before you secure your child's."

Or, as the Talmud says, "Don't give more than a fifth of your earnings to charity!"⁵ Otherwise, in no time, you'll have nothing left to give, or anything with which to live.⁶

Red Heifer

Selflessness; Altruism

Parshah

Chukat

FOOTNOTES

1. Talmud, Shabbat 31a.
2. See Numbers 19:8, 10.
3. Perhaps it can be said that due to the novelty of this idea and its uniqueness (even) to Judaism, the Torah says in reference to the Red Heifer: "*Zot chukat ha-Torah*"—"This is the law of the Torah." As if to say that this mitzvah expresses the uniqueness of the Torah: the fact that it encourages us to give up everything, even sometimes the very ideals that the Torah itself promotes, for the sake of helping another!
4. Rashi on Numbers 19:9.
5. Talmud, Ketubot 67b.
6. Based on the teachings of the Rebbe, published in Likkutei Sichot, vol. 25, pp. 79–85; vol. 4, p. 1060.

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