

How many of you have read Shel Silverstein's book, *The Giving Tree*? Written 45 years ago, it has become a classic of children's literature, a story that today's parents may well remember being read to them when they were kids a generation ago.

It's a beautiful book with a deeply touching message. In Silverstein's story, the tree is a selfless giver, offering the boy shade and fruit -- both renewable gifts -- yet ultimately parting with its leaves and limbs, its trunk, and eventually its life. No matter what it gives, the happiness of the insatiable boy is transient; time and again he returns to the tree, older, more cynical, more demanding, but never better off from the gifts so lovingly bestowed. At the end of the book, the stump of the tree is happy simply because she's able to furnish a resting place for the tired boy grown old.

It's easy to take issue with the selfishness of the boy, the self-absorbed taker whose gratitude is so short-lived. But the boy isn't the only culprit; it's the tree who serves as an enabler in a very real way. Or as my colleague, Rabbi Marc Gellman, put it in a symposium on Silverstein's book, "We can ask if giving, helping, and bestowing can in some cases become wicked: wicked because it is debilitating to the self-reliance of the recipient; wicked because it deprives one of the capacity to give also to others; wicked because it infantilizes the recipient."

Healthy relationships require balance, a yin-and-yang of reciprocity. The classic Jewish formulation of this fundamental truth is found in the rhetorical questions posed by the 1st century sage, Hillel -- questions that have to be asked together in the same breath: **אם אין אני לי מי לי? וכשאני לעצמי מה אני?** -- If I am not for myself who will be for me? Yet if I am only for myself what am I?"

This week's Torah portion, *Parshat B'shalah* offers a lesson in how to transform unhealthy relationships into more balanced ones. At the beginning of *Exodus*, we encounter a beneficent God who anguishes over the cries of the Israelites. In *Giving Tree* fashion, God redeems Israel from Egypt with signs and wonders, with plagues, yet asks for little in return. At the edge of the Sea of Reeds, once again God swoops in to save our ancestors from disaster.

The people sing joyously of their escape, but no more than three days later they grumble about the quality of the drinking water, and within a month lament, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt; you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve the whole congregation to death!” No gratitude, no memory of God’s caring, no recollection of how much the Egyptians took from them -- their dignity, their autonomy; instead they nostalgically recall the fleshpots of Egypt, the rations their masters grudgingly provided to sustain their labors.

A few years ago, clinical psychologist Harriet Braiker wrote a *New York Times Bestseller* entitled *The Disease-to-Please*. In it, she debunks the myth that people pleasers are just nice folks who go a little overboard. Those who suffer from the Disease-to-Please are individuals who can’t say “no” -- even when they want to, even when good sense dictates they should. For them the uncontrollable need for the elusive approval of others, and more especially, their irrational fear of disapproval, is a kind of emotional addiction. And so they use “niceness” and “people-pleasing” as a kind of self-defense which, over time, exhausts and depletes them. Eventually, they wind up like the “Giving Tree,” a dead stump unable to conceive of its own self-worth apart from the thoughts of others.

God, of course, doesn’t suffer from the “Disease-to-Please.” The Eternal is compassionate, loving, beneficent above and beyond what any of us deserve, but the good Lord’s self-esteem hardly depends on human beings. And so this week, in *Parshat B’shalah*, God bestows upon Israel a great gift -- not the manna, the free food that comes from heaven, but the rules that accompany the gift; with elegant simplicity they function as an ethical guide to taking from others with grace and gratitude..

God says to Moses, “הנני ממטיר לכם לחם מן השמים ולקטו דבר יום ביומו, למען אנסנו הילך בתורתִי אם לא -- I will rain down bread for you from the sky, and the people shall go and gather each that day’s portion -- that I may test them whether they will follow My teachings or not” (*Exodus* 16:4). The instructions are straightforward: don’t hoard; take a double portion on Friday (which is why we use two *hallot* on Shabbat); and don’t go looking for any manna on Shabbat, because there won’t be any.

But what, exactly, is God testing?. Dov Ber of Mezeritch, a great Hasidic figure of the 18th century suggests that the good Lord was testing the people's ability to be grateful -- if the Israelites were assured of food to eat without any effort on their part, would they remember to be thankful? You can easily transpose the question in modern terms: if our children don't earn the money, and neither shop for nor cook the food that ends up on the table, do they still express their appreciation for the sustenance they receive?

Another view maintains that God wanted to see if they'd remain appreciative of the manna, since they would continue to receive the same food day-after-day, month-after-month, year-after-year. What would matter to them in the end -- their craving for novelty or their gratitude for nourishment? This, too, is easy to translate into a contemporary context: how often have we heard family members complain, "What, meatloaf *again*?"

Still another view holds that the Almighty wanted to see whether the people would only collect what they truly needed, or would they instead grab as much as they could, even more than they could possibly ever finish?

Throughout their desert wanderings, at one time or another our ancestors failed all of the above tests. But let's not get too snug -- we continue to fail them today. Ours is a society in which our memories grow shorter and shorter. Overwhelmed with technology, with choices, and lives that suffer from TMI ("Too-Much-Information") overload, our appreciation of others is more disposable than ever. Writing in last week's *New York Times* Sunday magazine, commentator Matt Bai observed, "In an accelerated culture, our loyalties toward just about everything -- laundry detergents, celebrities, even churches and spouses -- transfer more readily than our grandparents could have imagined. Now we dispose of phone carriers and cash-back credit cards from one month to the next, forever in search of some better deal. Forget the staying power of an institution like Johnny Carson; when Jay Leno starts to feel a little stale, he is shifted to prime time, then shifted back to late night."

The challenge we face is an inability to create healthy reciprocity in a world of amnesia. Take quarterback Brett Favre -- maybe you admire him, maybe you don't. Either way, at the age of 40 he had an amazing season in leading the Vikings to the cusp of an NFC championship. Yet listening to the pundits of the pigskin last week, it all boiled down to talk about Favre's fourth quarter interception throw to cornerback Tracy Porter, which cost the Purple People Eaters a conference championship and a ticket to the Superbowl. To be sure, there are many, many athletes who have given their all to a sport or a team . . . only to be discarded when they're no longer useful. Today we are confronted by a vexing spiritual question: ***How can you be there for me tomorrow, when you can't remember what I did for you yesterday?***

Everywhere we look, we see imbalances in life's equation of giving and taking. Unhealthy taking and unhealthy giving walk hand-in-hand, creating a crippling co-dependency that undermines well-being, destroys relationships, and distorts the value we assign ourselves and others. How many of us in this room feel like all the relationships in our lives are in perfect balance, that our giving is equal to our taking and *vice versa*? Consider the following statements -- perhaps you've heard them uttered, or maybe you've thought them yourself: "Look at how much I do for my spouse and yet when I ask him for a simple . . ."; or "Isn't it incredible how much Shaina Faygl does for the synagogue; the woman wears twelve different hats -- why does it always seem that it's the same few people who volunteer?" or; "After all I've done for my company, you'd think my boss might express just a little appreciation or recognition" . . . "My guess is that many of us, maybe even most of us, feel some imbalance in at least one or more of our relationships.

But Judaism has a powerful antidote toward the spiritual malaise and emotional amnesia from which our society suffers, an antidote consisting of the the two most important words in all religious thought. They aren't "I believe," but rather "thank you." Indeed, our very name as Jews, *Yehudim* in Hebrew, comes from the root *hodeh* -- to thank, to acknowledge. The fulcrum on which the give-and-take of life rests is gratitude, because you can't give in a healthy fashion unless you value the gift enough to understand its worth; and you can't take in a positive vein unless you appreciate what it truly is to receive. To be Jewish is literally to be thankful, to be grateful implied by the very etymology of the words "Jew" *yehudi* and "Judaism" *yahadut*. It's

hardly accidental that the first word of the traditional *siddur* is *Modeh*, recited upon first awakening and opening one's eyes in the morning. *Modeh ani lifanekha* -- I am grateful to You, living, enduring Sovereign for compassionately restoring my soul to me." Having a fixed liturgy may not always be enough to create a meaningful worship experience, but it does remind us of the importance of saying "thank you" -- thank you to the God for the gift of this day, thank you to our loved ones for being there, thank you to everyone from the supermarket checker to the cable TV repairman, and from the X-ray technician to the police officer on patrol who makes it possible for us to eat, be entertained, stay healthy and keep safe. And no matter how creative, clever or entertaining a worship service may be, it is ultimately of little value unless people are prepared to enter the sanctuary humbly aware of all they receive from God and others, and leave with a determination to give back some of what they take from the world. No, to exist God doesn't need us to say thank you to Him; it's that we need to say thank you to be truly human, to recognize the magnitude of what we take and take for granted, for it is that which invariably teaches the responsibility we have to give.

The poet John Milton wrote, "A grateful mind by owing owes not, but still pays, at once indebted and discharged." Perhaps one day we will regain this paradise lost, a land not of giving trees, but sharing trees, a garden of life in which we both tend and harvest in balance. Until then we'd do well to consider the wisdom of the Beatles: "And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make."