Economic Downturn, Spiritual Upturn: Thoughts on Parashat Beha'aloteha, June 13, 2009

View PDF

When Aaron the high priest is commanded to light the Menorah, the Torah uses the word "beha'aloteha"--when you kindle. The literal meaning of the word is: when you raise up (the lights). A homiletical meaning may be: when you light the Menorah, you yourself will be raised, you will feel better about yourself--stronger and happier. Aaron is being told that by kindling the lights of the Menorah, he not only brings light to the sanctuary and inspiration to the public: he actually improves himself.

This is an important message in the fulfillment of all mitzvoth. When we do the right thing, we not only serve God properly: we raise our own spirit and self-esteem. When we perform acts of kindness and goodness, we ourselves become better people. This principle applies to charitable giving. Jewish law teaches that even a person dependant on charity must also give charity, however little it may be. The very act of giving charity demonstrates a commitment to others, and also offers self-validation to the donor. It means: I can help someone, I am not merely a victim, I can play a role in improving the world.

The New York Times reported (June 10, 2009) that during the past year, charitable giving in the United States has dropped to the lowest level in five decades. All non-profit institutions (including the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals!) have felt the severe drop in philanthropic activity. People are giving much less than in the past due to the severe economic downturn. Some people contribute less because they are unemployed, are in debt, or fear that they may soon lose their jobs. Some people contribute less because they are earning less while their expenses continue to grow. There are also people who are doing fine economically, but are giving less anyway. They now have a good excuse for not giving: the economic downturn. Even though they're well off, they blame the economy for why they are giving less charity. They can point to the decline in the size of their stock portfolios as an indication that they too are suffering--even if their stock portfolios still hold substantial amounts.

During a period of economic downturn, it is all the more important that we maintain our charitable giving. This is vital for the wellbeing of the institutions

that depend on us and the many individuals who rely on our generosity. When we make our contributions, we not only help needy individuals and worthy institutions: we validate our own selves; we demonstrate that we are active members of society and not passive victims; we feel better, stronger and happier. To be sure, we should give within our means; but we should not give less than our means.

Each of us can make contributions to our synagogues, our UJA-Federation networks, our local day schools and yeshivoth, our social service agencies, the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals... each of us can strengthen the institutions and causes we cherish, on whatever level we can afford. When we do so, we help make the world a better place--and we help raise our own spirit and self-esteem. Let us write our checks, make our online contributions: let us help raise the lights of idealism and Torah values. Although this is a time of economic downturn, it can and should be a time of spiritual upturn.

***The Angel for Shabbat column is presented as a service of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (jewishideas.org). Please feel free to send copies of this column to your email contact lists, and to reproduce it for distribution in your synagogues.

Angel for Shabbat