

Are You Being Taken Advantage Of?

written by Chaya Rivka Zwolinski | July 19, 2021



Doormat-itis

Do you feel like you can't say "no"? Does it seem like people take advantage of your kindness? Do you try to overlook people's faults and concentrate on their *nikudos tovos* (good points) as Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches us, but end up feeling resentful? If so, this post's for you.

I came home late Sunday, exhausted but uplifted, from the women's program [Azamra: Hearing the Song of Your Soul*](#). We created a new, multi-expression program for BRI and the first one took place at the JCC in Manhattan. The feedback was terrific, women really enjoyed this day of song, meditation, art, and healing. (Please follow this blog/enter your email near the top right of this page if you want to know where

we'll be doing this program next.)

After I had decompressed for a few minutes and ate some dinner, it was time to get back to work. I am so blessed that part of my job involves watching inspiring videos of BreslovCampus.org. But I was tired, and wanted to finish up quickly. Then, one video jolted me. It's called [Are You Being Taken Advantage Of?](#)

In it, Meir Elkabas speaks about how to find that balance between doing the right thing/fulfilling the Torah obligation of chesed on the one hand, and having people walk all over you on the other.

For many women, this is a struggle. It can be difficult to navigate the murky waters of assertiveness vs. aggressiveness, lovingkindness vs. submission, and giving vs. giving everything away, including your self-respect.

Many of us feel guilty if we say no. We all want to be kind and good and generous, but how can we do this and not feel like a victim? What's the sweet spot, the point where you are truly being a mentsch, but not laying down like a door mat? How can we avoid the extremes of selfishness vs. self-destruction?

Understanding Who You Are

King David said there are three signs by which we identify the Jewish people. A Jew is merciful, [bashful](#), and benevolent. Of course there are individuals who do not seem to fulfill all or even any of these characteristics.* However, each of us has some latent measure of these three traits—they are our *characterological potential*. We get to choose if we want to work towards that potential or not.

This takes effort by the way. Compassion, humility, and generosity require practice and action. Like love, the real thing isn't merely passive or a feeling.

But can we go too far in the direction of giving? Yes. Rebbe Nachman says that we shouldn't go too far above our spiritual capabilities. Giving to others is a vital part of Jewish spirituality, and we need to be sure we are giving as much as possible, without leaving us feeling used, empty, or resentful.

Money

Let's talk in material terms to start, they're easier to quantify. For example, the minimum tithe a Jew must give is ten percent of one's income. (Speak to a Rav about how to define income, many give from their after-tax income, some have other measures depending on their situation.)

The Torah tells us that the average person (one who is not wealthy) shouldn't give away more than one fifth of their income. If we do, we might impoverish ourselves and end up relying on others for help. Then we might end up causing hardship for others, even taking away charity other people truly need.

Many Breslovers make an effort to give twenty percent because Rebbe Nachman exhorts us to acquire the powerful soul corrections of giving tzedakah. Breslovers have a custom in this regard.

That being said, many of us have an urge to give over and above what we can realistically afford. Scratch the surface and we find it almost physically painful to say "no" to anyone who asks us for tzedakah (charity). Yes, there is a halacha that we must give charity when asked, but there are certain situations where we are required to say no.

Now, if you are at the level where you are willing to cut down on your own expenses and make do with less to help another, then you are living within your material and spiritual means. This is an ideal.

But if you find you give so much that you have to take tzedakah from others because you can't meet your own needs, or if you find you have regrets about giving, or feel resentment, then your actions are clearly not within your material or spiritual means at this time (could be in future, though.) And make no mistake, your material means and your spiritual means overlap, they all come from the same Source.

(As to whom we should give tzedakah, please ask a Rav. There are important halachic guidelines for how to give and to whom.)

Giving Time, Talents, & Effort

Sorting out giving monetary tzedakah is actually fairly simple. It doesn't always involve a big emotional investment. We work, we must give a certain percentage, we give it to halachically appropriate recipients (which may not always be who we feel like giving too), and we accrue the spiritual benefits of distributing the money which God has given us for this purpose.

But what about giving of your time? Your talents? Making an effort to help others in the myriad ways we help each other?

The Torah doesn't set quite as tidy a limit for non-monetary chesed the way it does for money. In part, that's because we're all one family, one soul. We should love each other as we love ourselves. We should be able to feel another person's suffering, as well as feel their joy. We should want to give, from the heart. And when we do give out of obligation more than desire, we can make the effort to give with a smile, so the recipient doesn't feel badly.

When it comes to others, we should be able to say: If I see you suffering then it is my responsibility to help you. It is not my responsibility to judge you or give you *mussar* (moral criticism/instruction.)

Conversely, when we ourselves suffer, we should look in the mirror to see where we need to improve (while not forgetting that we have *nikudos tovos*, too.) That's asking a lot. But it's not anything we aren't capable of or Hashem wouldn't have put it in our lives.

So what happens when we feel worn out, we feel that we're giving away too much, and there's nothing left for us or our families? (even when people are appreciative.)

Is it selfish to take care of ourselves, even put ourselves first? If you assess your situation honestly, no.

It's okay to say I need alone time. Or, I need to spend time with just my family. Or, I want to help your volunteer organization but I find it too depleting to cook extra meals when I don't have to, can I make phone calls instead?

Or even: No, I am already using a significant portion of my time for chesed work outside my home, and I need to be available to do chesed at home, now.

Sometimes, the greatest kindness is actually giving chesed to yourself. You are a neshama in need too. You need to experience refreshment and renewal. When you honestly assess your needs and you do this when you have a real need to, you'll stay fresh.

If you say "yes" to every request for help, it's likely you'll burn out. You'll feel overwhelmed.

The truth is, if you always say yes, you might become the person about whom others say, "I can't help you but ask so and so, she always says yes." If your ego isn't attached to that, great. Part of you though may be pleased that you're the one everyone turns to for help, but then, that kind of giving can become a narcissistic habit, not a character-building one.

Giving too much can even become a crutch or a way to control

others. Sometimes, helping others takes up so much time you end up avoiding dealing with important issues you need to take care of.

Another problem with saying "yes" all the time is that it might not always be good for others. There are some people who will take advantage of your kindness. They'll ask for your help even if they don't need it or if it is more convenient for them. They'll do it because they can. They won't have scruples about inconveniencing you as long as it is convenient for them. This doesn't help them and it doesn't help you.

All in all, erring on the side of being kind and generous is the Jewish way. But if you're feeling overburdened, stressed-out, or just taken advantage of, spend some time in self-reflection. Talk to Hashem about what you are feeling and ask Him for guidance in how to achieve balance. And watch the BreslovCampus video, below.