

The Gift of Asking – A Fresh Perspective on Jewish Fundraising

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If you believe in your institution, than you need to believe that raising funds for your institution is an honor and a privilege.

By Rae Ringel

For many of us, the prospect of asking for money of a donor conjures painful fears of rejection and disparagement. We think little of ignoring the dinnertime phone solicitation but dread being the one to make the ask. Recognizing this common anxiety, even for experienced fundraisers, I spend many hours helping staff and board members leading important mission-driven organizations develop a fresh perspective on asking for charitable contributions.

Many workshops on fundraising focus on tactics and strategies like knowing your product, preparing talking points, and negotiating gift increases. These are all important skills but they won't be effective without the proper mindset. I like to challenge my clients to see fundraising as an opportunity and not a threat. An offer, not only a request. The chance to elevate the giver to a higher purpose, to provide the tools to make a profound difference, to change a life or event more, a part of the world.

Think about it this way: we ask for things all the time when we think others will benefit in even the most minimal of ways. Can I get you a cup of coffee? Can I take your coat? Can I get the door for you? We tell people all the time that they should part with their dollars. We suggest products, restaurants, shops and vacations that we think others will benefit from and enjoy. Asking for a donation should be no exception. Providing the opportunity to give is also a benefit. You are presenting the platform for your donor to do a just and good deed that will bring them great satisfaction while changing the lives of others.

For many donors in the Jewish Community, this feeling of satisfaction is further amplified when their gift is understood within the framework of a moral imperative. Eric, the Rabbi of a prominent synagogue was comfortable in his role as community builder, advocate for social justice and spiritual leader – but far less so as fundraiser. Nonetheless, he knew that he would not be able to bring to fruition his vision for the organization without sufficient resources. Together we explored new thought habits he could adopt about fundraising. How could he see fundraising as just another way of helping his donors perform a *mitzvah*, or Jewish commandment? Eric began to see that fundraising was a vehicle for something he really believed in ... catalyzing others to do good deeds. With this paradigm shift, he successfully spearheaded a capital campaign that raised nearly five million dollars and now views fundraising as among his holiest work.

Other donors don't need a specific imperative – they just want to be asked. Adam, the Executive Director of a Jewish nonprofit, also did not list fundraising among his favorite aspects of the job! One day he was having coffee with a major donor who was well known for making substantial gifts across the community. He knew she was involved in an endowment program for another organization and asked her what prompted her to participate. She replied very humbly, "they just asked." This was a light bulb moment for Adam. He realized that people want to be wanted. They want the opportunity to give, to be a part of your important work. Reading this donor's statement as an invitation to be asked, he inquired if she would also be willing to name his organization in her bequest. She said "of course." That was all it took to secure a gift

that would support his organization in perpetuity.

Sitting up a little straighter now? You should. A mindset shift should also be reflected in physical comportment. When most people ask for money, they tend to approach the moment in a defensive stance, slumping their shoulders in a mode of apology. Instead, you should stand tall with your shoulders back, confident in your offering and the worthiness of your cause. I'll talk a lot more about the importance of comportment in a future post. For now, remember to stand up straight, lift your chin and smile, knowing that your ask is a precious gift to the donor. Watch how this changes the dynamic of your interaction – and your prospects for success.

Fundraising is a part of our collective Jewish history. For generations, *tzedakah* has been a pillar of the Jewish community. The rabbis of classical Judaism praised *tzedakah*, calling it “equal in value to all the other commandments combined.” Perhaps *tzedakah* is viewed so highly because it encapsulates so many integral Jewish values: loving your neighbor, respecting others, repairing the world and performing righteous acts. But what about the critical job of the asker? Do we consider the vital and inspiring role of the *tzedakah* collector? How is the act of asking someone for money a sacred Jewish experience?

Early on in my career, I found it daunting to reframe the concept of asking people for money. We all hold onto assumptions about the “schnurer” and the calls interrupting dinner. I looked to Jewish sources for a new perspective, and I found many texts that related to the giving of *tzedakah*. But where were all of the texts about asking? How would I make my case?

Then, I found the gift I was looking for – the first tractate of the Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Batra*, deals extensively with the matters of charity. In it contains the following phrase, “*He who causes others to do good is greater than the doer.*” I rest my case. If a person convinces another person to give, his or her reward is greater than when giving personally. I was particularly drawn to the Hebrew play on words, “*mi-aseh min ha-oseh*,” meaning greater is the one who activates than the one who acts. The word “*mi-aseh*” is a causative verb. It's about enabling, leading, inspiring and guiding. The other person still makes the choice to act in the end, but the asker has a hand in directing the action.

When you ask someone for *tzedakah*, you give them an **opportunity** to perform a *mitzvah* that they may not have done on their own. You are leading them to perform a righteous act and helping them to change the world. With this new perspective, the donor should actually thank you for asking!

In the same tractate, the following verse is cited, “and they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament and they that turn many to righteousness are like the stars forever and ever.” The Talmud explains that the second part of the verse “and that they turn many to righteousness” refers to the collectors for charity. This is another reference where the collectors of charity are leading people to do good in the world. Further strengthening our case, the askers are likened to bright stars in the sky.

With these sources as our backing, how do we embrace a new attitude about asking?

First, we can remind ourselves that asking is a privilege. If you believe in your institution, than you need to believe that raising funds for your institution is an honor and a privilege.

Second, we can approach donors by making both a *request and an offer*. What is in it for the donor? What opportunities are we offering by making this request? It's an important distinction and will impact how you as the asker “show up” when you are fundraising.

Finally, it's time for a new mindset. Lets throw out images of dinnertime robo-callers and door-to-door solicitors. Fundraising is an art form that begins not with technical expertise but a profound mindset shift. Mahatma Ghandi once said, “*A man is but the product of his thoughts. What he thinks, he becomes.*” You have the opportunity to adopt a new perspective of what it means to ask. It is time to look at asking as a

way to bring people closer to your mission, instead of pushing them away.

The gift of asking is a precious treasure that can never be consumed. It will change the way you conduct solicitations and even how you think about your organization's work.

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