

Give It Away!

Rabbi Tarfon was very rich. One day Rabbi Akiva met him and said "My master, shall I purchase for you a town or two?" "Yes" said Rabbi Tarfon, and immediately gave Rabbi Akiva 4,000 gold dinars. Akiva distributed the money to poor scholars.

Later Tarfon met him and said "Where are the towns you bought for me?" Akiva showed him to the house of study where a small child was reciting the psalms. The child came to 112:9: "He gives freely to the poor, his goodness lasts forever. Akiva said "This is the town." Tarfon kissed him and said "Akiva, you are my master in wisdom, and leader in the ways of the world" and gave him more money to spend (Massechet Kala 2).

Educating ourselves to giving is not always easy. There is a natural cupidity; even when it is not rapacious (think, "Wolf of Wall Street") we find it hard to give away what is ours. But R. Akiva, one of our greatest sages, reminds us that wealth is a loan, and one never regrets tzedakah

as it both enables and inspires others to live better. If Rabbi Tarfon could learn from Akiva's teaching, so can we.