

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates

Chances are you've never heard of Charles Feeney. He wears a \$15 watch, doesn't own a house or car, and when he flies, travels coach. Feeney says, "I try to live a normal life, the way I grew up." Charles Feeney, though, is anything but normal: He's a billionaire who made and gave away a fortune without anyone knowing. Born in New Jersey during the Great Depression to blue collar Irish-American parents, he has given grants totaling more than \$5 billion supporting health, social and educational projects throughout the world. Feeney earned his wealth in the Duty Free Shoppers Group in the 1960s.

Unlike many philanthropists, Feeney wanted anonymity. The foundation he established doesn't bear his name, and he never took tax deductions on his philanthropic work. All donations were given via cashier's check. When he was "discovered" in 1996 and became an honored guest at events, Feeney would bring his own photographer, who would pretend to take pictures of him without any film in the camera. Nearly every profile makes note of how unimpressed Feeney is with what his wealth can buy him. Feeney said, "I set out to work hard, not to get rich ... I had one idea that never changed in my mind—that you should use your wealth to help people." When asked why he decided to give away virtually his entire fortune, Feeney replied, "I simply decided I had enough money ...I did not want money to consume my life."

People offer gifts for all types of reasons, but one of the greatest is when we give graciously with no expectation of receiving something in return. King David said, "the righteous man gives with a good grace." (Psalms 37:21) Like the remarkable Charles Feeney, those who act righteously give, and give graciously.

Parshas Vayigash Genesis 44:18 -- 47:27

Judah makes an impassioned plea to the powerful Egyptian ruler (Joseph, still in disguise) for Benjamin's life, claiming that Jacob would surely die from sorrow if he lost Benjamin. Judah offers to remain in Egypt as a slave in place of his younger brother. Unable to restrain himself any longer, Joseph reveals his identity to his stunned brothers and forgives them for selling him into slavery so many years before.

Joseph then sends his brothers back to the land of Israel, laden with gifts, to bring Jacob and their families down to Egypt where they will live in the province of Goshen. Before Jacob leaves home, G-d appears to him in a 'vision of the night', reassuring him that He will be with them and that they will eventually return to the land of Israel as a great nation. After 22 years of separation, Jacob is reunited with his beloved son Joseph. Joseph embraces his father and weeps, overflowing with joy, and then brings his father to meet Pharaoh. The portion concludes by describing how Joseph uses his vast power to amass nearly all of the wealth of Egypt for Pharaoh's treasury.

Rabbinic Ruminations

As we approach the beginning of 2012, many New Year's resolutions will be made. Too often, though, those commitments will soon be broken. One survey found that 25% of resolutions bite the dust within a week, and about half do so within six months. And these figures may well be low, since people tend to be biased against admitting they blew it. What can we do to increase our chances of actually keeping our promises to ourselves? One tip is to avoid making our resolutions public.

Making our goals public can have precisely the opposite effect from what we intend. You might think that when you tell your friends that you intend to, say, learn Hebrew, or quit smoking, or lose weight, it should increase your accountability. You've told a friend, so in theory you are more committed to it. But a study by Gollwitzer et al. (2010) showed that when participants had shared their goal with someone else, instead of increasing their commitment, it reduced it. One suggested explanation is that the very act of showing off our goal to others gives us some sense that we've taken the first step towards reaching it. This illusion of progress reduces future effort and motivation.

It has been said that without goals and plans to reach them, we are like a ship that has set sail with no destination. Or, in the words of Yogi Berra, "If you don't know where you are going, you might wind up someplace else." Little can be achieved without goals. But when we do make goals and resolutions, it's probably better to keep them private.

Quote of the Week

If there is any honor in all the world that I should like, it would be to be an honorary Jewish citizen. -- A.L Rowse, Shakespearean scholar (1903-1997)

Joke of the Week

A Martian spaceship lands in Brooklyn, and the impact of the landing is so great that the wheels on the craft are destroyed. Two Martians set out to find replacement wheels and to their great relief immediately encounter a store with a large assortment of wheels in the window.

"We'll take four of those wheels in the window," says one of the Martians to the shopkeeper.

"Those aren't wheels," he says. "They're bagels. They're to eat - here, try one."

The two Martians take a few bites and then one turns to the shopkeeper and says, "They aren't bad, but they'd be a lot better with cream cheese and lox."

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