

Book Review

Rambam's Ladder

A Meditation on Generosity and Why It Is Necessary to Give

By Julie Salamon

(Workman, 183 pages)

By Lauren Katzowitz Shenfield, Philanthropy Advisors

In the days after September 11, when most of the world was wondering why people are bad, Julie Salamon wondered why they are good. A culture writer for The New York Times, author of several books and a former reporter for The Wall Street Journal, Salamon asked unconventional questions in the aftermath of the tragedy and embarked on an uncommon spiritual journey. "I felt no urge to give blood, make sandwiches or search for the missing," she writes in the introduction to this highly personal volume. "... While I was glad others were searching for terrorists, for me the quest for goodness became far more compelling and urgent."

Friends led her to a touchstone created by a 12th Century sage, Moses ben Maimon, known to the Greeks as Maimonides and to his followers as Rambam, an acrostic constructed from the letters of his name. Who was Rambam? Revered by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, the medieval philosopher addressed questions of goodness and giving. In analyzing the process, he created, in Salamon's words, "a handy eight-step program" known as the Ladder of Charity. In Salamon's post-September 11th world, Rambam's ladder became a yardstick for values, beliefs and actions.

Salamon explores the contemporary urge to do good ("[It] feels like a life raft on the river of human troubles...") and pays homage to her own struggle to negotiate the ladder from the bottom rung of reluctance to the eighth of responsibility. (Contrary to popular belief, she informs us, anonymity is not the highest form of giving.) Each rung will reverberate for NYRAG readers as they examine their own beliefs on issues of proportion (What is the right amount to give?), solicitation, boundaries and corruption. Salamon indeed presents us with a meditation on generosity that we can all take to heart.

But it is the second question she explores that catches us by surprise. Why is it necessary to give? "The challenge laid down by Maimonides was to hardwire giving into your soul," she tells us. Salamon's research led her to all kinds of people -- from the chairs of NYRAG member organizations to the homeless -- and including development officers and other grantee staffers with whom we deal. They had one thing in common, she says: Giving gave them a unique connection to other people. Here Salamon moves us to explore our own journey up and down the ladder and to acknowledge the frustrations and disappointments, as well as the gratification, that constitute the complex dynamic of our work.

Don't look to this book for advice on strategic giving, public versus private responsibility or the case for general support. Instead, Salamon's meditation will encourage you to think about what motivates you each day and how you handle each request and grantee relationship. *Rambam's Ladder* is a fine springboard for discussion, with colleagues, boards, families and friends, especially those who think you are "lucky" to have such an "easy" job or responsibility.

Salamon's focus on the process of giving and its transformative potential probes the unique human relationship created by generosity. It acknowledges the philanthropy of ordinary people, as well as that of wealthy individuals and institutions, and gives honor to the recipient. It challenges us to identify and address our own discomforts in giving. At this time of year, we especially value a guide who sees philanthropy not just as a vehicle of the rich, or as an engine of society, but as a personal and professional mission in which we can find meaning and potential growth. That is Salamon's gift to us.