

ONFAITH

ASKING THE CLERGY

What does your faith say about gifts?

RABBI CARA WEINSTEIN ROSENTHAL

Melville Jewish Center



Cara Weinstein Rosenthal

I still remember the night over 40 years ago when I received my favorite Hanukkah gift of my childhood years — a hot-pink Barbie convertible. Receiving a gift is one of the great pleasures of life, especially when that gift resonates with our interests, and when it expresses the love of a person we treasure. Of course, giving a gift to a loved one can also bring great joy. Keeping Jewish values in mind can help ensure that our practice of gift-giving doesn't devolve into a materialistic race to keep up with the Goldsteins, or to give in to our children's every retail-related whim. In the Talmud, the ancient sage Rabbi Akiva teaches that it is forbidden to taste the pleasures of this world without first reciting a blessing that expresses gratitude to God. I believe that this idea suggests a healthy approach towards gift-giving as well. It's wonderful to share gifts, but this practice should always be grounded in gratitude for what we receive. This focus on gratitude can lead us to approach gift-giving with perspective, and to make sure that we also remember to give to those who are in need through acts of tzedakah (charity).