



# TZEDAKAH: THE “LAW” OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

By Steve LaCheen

One of the more protean concepts in the Hebrew language is encompassed in the word “Tzedakah” (pronounced tse-DOCK-eh), which is generally defined as charity and mercy. The root of the word, however, is “tzedek,” meaning righteousness and, more than just charity or philanthropy, incorporates the principle of social justice as well.

In other words, tzedakah is the obligation to establish justice by being righteous, upright, compassionate and, above all, helping one’s fellow human beings. Historically, the care of the well-to-do for the poor was not merely voluntary or optional. Rather, it was governed by exact rules, both as to the amount (generally 10 percent, although the amount of charity a man gives should be proportionate to his means), and as to the manner in which it was to be dispensed and received. Those who were able were forbidden to ignore or turn away anyone in need who asked for help.

Leo Rosten, “The Joys of Yiddish.”

A guiding principle was that the recipients of tzedakah were never to be shamed by public disclosure. It was considered better to give no charity at all than to give to the poor in public. Traditionally, in the ancient Temple, and in many synagogues thereafter, there was a room dedicated to tzedakah that was open all day, every day. Anyone could enter, but only one person at a time, so no one else would know whether it was to give or take; that is, whether to leave an offering or to take from the available offerings money to feed his family. Whether donor, needy recipient, or even thief, no one but he would know.

The ideals of tzedakah were set down by Rabbi Moses Maimonides 800 years ago. He compared tzedakah to a step-ladder, from low to high, from worst to best. The Eight

Degrees of Tzedakah, adapted from Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah Laws of Gifts to the Poor, are rated as follows:

1. Giving too little, and as if forced to give.
2. Giving too little, but giving cheerfully as if happy to give.
3. Giving as much as needed, but only after being asked for it.
4. Giving as much as needed, and before being asked for it.
5. Giving enough, and before being asked, and in such a way that the poor person knows who gives him help but the helper does not know who the poor person is.
6. Giving enough, and before being asked, and in such a way that the giver knows who gets the charity but the receiver does not know who has given it to him.
7. Giving enough, and before being asked, and in such a way that neither the giver nor the receiver knows the other.
8. Finally, at the very top of the ladder of tzedakah is the step of helping the needy person by lending him money to open a business, or joining him in a partnership, or finding him a job, so that he can support himself and not need charity.

There are, of course, hundreds of traditional tzedakah stories in the Bible, in the Biblical Commentaries, and in the myths, legends and folk tales, handed down through the centuries. Folk tales of the rabbis often involve their creative efforts to extract tzedakah contributions for the poor and needy from the



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rich and selfish, of which the following might be considered a representative sampling:

#### THE DOORSTEP DIALOGUE

As was his custom, the Rabbi “made his rounds” every Friday morning, from door to door, seeking contributions to buy wood and coal for the poor. It was winter, and it was cold, but the Rabbi was so focused on his goal that he hardly felt the biting wind.

Up one street and down another, the Rabbi made his way, and at almost every house he was welcomed and given a donation for his cause. One house, however, had always escaped, or at least ignored the Rabbi’s entreaties - the house of the richest man in town, who always managed to be away or, if at home, to have an excuse to avoid making a contribution.

On this particular morning, the Rabbi decided to press the issue. His knock on the rich man’s door was answered by a servant, who opened the door wide, inviting the Rabbi’s entry.

But the Rabbi declined the invitation to enter, saying he was wet and did not want to drip water or mud on the carpets.

“I will wait for your master here,” said the Rabbi, “and you may tell him I do not expect him to make a donation today.”

Within minutes his host appeared at the door.

“Good day, Rabbi,” he said. “I am honored that you have graced my home with a visit. Welcome, and come in. Let me offer you a glass of tea, or something to warm you on this cold, wet day.”

“No, thank you,” the Rabbi responded, “I wouldn’t want to muddy

your carpets, and besides, I have errands to run and only need a minute of your time.”

“Good,” said the rich man, who had come to the door in his shirt sleeves, and was already feeling the effects of the cold. “What can I do for you, Rabbi?”

“Oh, I don’t want anything but your opinion on a matter which has been troubling me,” said the Rabbi, and launched into a discussion of not one, but a number of topics of community interest.

Two or three times the host interrupted the Rabbi, asking him to please come inside, but on each occasion, the Rabbi demurred, saying he really had to go, but had just one more topic on which he wanted an opinion. Finally, the rich man, trembling with cold, speaking through chattering teeth, said “Rabbi, I am honored you want my opinion on so many subjects, but if you do not come inside and let me close the door, I will freeze to death.”

“Ah,” said the Rabbi. “You are feeling for only a few minutes what the poor who barely have enough for food, let alone fuel, feel all day every day. Perhaps you would consider making a donation?”

“How much?” asked the rich man. The Rabbi said the amount was up to him, because people were never asked to give more than they felt they could afford.

“I beg you,” said the rich man, “just tell me how much you have collected so far today. Tell me before I turn blue from ...” The Rabbi showed him how much he had already collected, and the rich man doubled the amount.

“Rabbi, you have taught me an important lesson,” said the man, “but

next week, if you do not come inside, I will not give you anything, because my fingers will be too stiff from the cold to count out any coins.”

#### SILVER BLINDNESS

Another such tale concerned the Rabbi in another village, who had never succeeded in getting a donation from the richest man there, a man known as much for his miserable affect as well as for his miserliness.

One day the Rabbi decided to try a different tack than just knocking on the rich man’s door and being turned away by a servant with an excuse. Instead, he sent a message to the man, saying he wanted to see him, not at his home and not at the synagogue, but at a tea shop in the poorest part of town.

Although always able to refuse a request for a donation, the rich man could not refuse to honor the Rabbi’s invitation to meet even though he knew the meeting would lead to a pitch for tzedakah for the poor; so he met the Rabbi when and where he asked.

To his surprise, however, the Rabbi never asked for a donation. They spoke of many things (of “cabbages and kings,” as the poet wrote) for quite a while, without any mention of the poor. At one point, however, out of the blue, the Rabbi asked the Miser if he was happy. Caught completely off guard, the rich man answered truthfully that he was miserable, and offered a laundry list of reasons he was unhappy, including, as the Rabbi expected, that he was worried that everyone was after his money, that he could never manage to feel secure, no matter how much he made, that he was not appreciated, and so on and so forth.

“Look,” said the Rabbi, “come to the



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window and tell me what you see.”

The Miser did as he was bid, and looked through the tea shop window at the passersby outside.

“I see a lot of poor people,” he said, “they are pathetic, but ...”

“Wait,” said the Rabbi, “there is something else I want you to look at now.”

The Rabbi walked the Miser over to the large mirror on the tea shop wall.

“Tell me what you see now,” said the Rabbi.

“I see myself, of course,” said the Miser.

“So tell me,” asked the Rabbi, “what is the difference between this piece of glass on the wall and the glass shop window?”

“The shop window is clear glass, and this is a mirror.”

“Yes, but what is it that makes them different?”

The Miser had no answer.

“I will tell you,” said the Rabbi. “The difference is simply a coating of silver. Without the silver, you saw the outside world through the shop window. Yet, with a thin coating of silver, the glass becomes a mirror, and all you can see is yourself.”

The Miser looked away from the mirror, first to the outside, and then to the Rabbi standing in front of him.

“That man in the mirror,” said the Rabbi, “has been blinded by the silver, and only sees himself. If he would look through the glass window and see the world outside of himself, he would regain not only his vision but a sense of his responsibility to his fellow human beings.

From that time forward, the Miser’s view of his world changed and, in helping others, he helped himself even

more; he became rich in the respect and friendship of his community.

But there are stories on the other side of the tzedakah coin as well; tales of the giving of tzedakah by the rabbis themselves to the poor. One of my favorites I heard retold recently by Rabbi Solomon Isaacson concerns a rabbi at whose front door a poor man appeared, looking for money for food for his family.

As it happened, the man had arrived late, after the rabbi had distributed every bit of his own money that he had on hand, as well as every bit that had been donated by the congregation for that week’s tzedakah. There was nothing left. What was the rabbi to do? He searched through the house, looking high and low, and, still nothing. Surely, the Almighty would not let this poor man’s family go hungry; He would provide, wouldn’t He?

And, God did provide.

The rabbi, in searching the house, came across a ring on his wife’s bureau; and, without a second thought, he gave the ring to the poor man to take to a jeweler in town who would give him money to buy the food for his family.

With a blessing for the rabbi, and thanks to the Almighty, the poor man took the ring and left.

Within minutes, the rabbi’s wife returned home; saying she had returned because she had left her ring on the bureau and was afraid it would be lost. It was, she reminded the rabbi, her favorite ring, an expensive ring that had been handed down to her through her family.

When the rabbi told his wife that he had given the ring to a poor man as tzedakah, his wife became furious and demanded that he get the ring back.

Mustering as much control as she was able, she explained that the ring he had so cavalierly given away was not, as he apparently thought, the inexpensive copy she was wearing, it was the expensive original, and he must try to retrieve it at any cost.

The rabbi went to find the sexton and sent him in hot pursuit of the ring-bearer, hoping to catch him before he reached the jeweler.

Within a hour, the sexton returned. His smiling countenance conveyed the successful outcome of his pursuit.

“Well,” said the Rabbi’s wife, smiling. “All’s well that ends well, so give me my ring.”

“But I don’t have the ring,” said the sexton, perplexed, and looked to the Rabbi.

“What does he mean, he doesn’t have the ring?” demanded the Rabbi’s wife.

“Because I never sent him to get the ring back,” said the Rabbi. “I sent the sexton to tell him how much the ring was worth so he would not sell it too cheaply!”

There are, of course, many more folk tales centered on the tradition of tzedakah and the principle of social justice, but these several are fair examples.

To quote an old adage, “The longest road in the world is the one that leads to the pocket.”

So, give already.

Moral: Tzedakah encompasses not only the principle of charity but the principle of justice, which makes charity obligatory. ■

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