

Tzedakah

Exodus 22:21

Do not afflict an orphan or a widow

Leviticus 25:35-37

When your brother Israelite is reduce to poverty and cannot support himself in the community [literally “and his hand falls”] you shall uphold him as you would a resident stranger...You shall not charge him interest on a loan

Deuteronomy 15:11

For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land...I command you to open your hand to the poor and needy

Deuteronomy 15:7-8

If there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen...do not harden your heart and shut your hand against him... You must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs

The Sifra on Leviticus 25:25-38 (above)

Concerning the words “and his hand falls”: This injunction may be explained with an analogy to a heavy load on a donkey: as long as the donkey is still standing up, one person may take hold of him and lead him [and keep him standing upright]. But once he has fallen, five men cannot raise him up again.

To allow recipients of charity to retain their dignity, and not see themselves as beggars, they made the following statement:

B. Talmud: Gittin 7b

Even a poor man who himself survives with charity should give charity

The **Leover Rebbe** once taught, “If a person comes to you for assistance, and you tell him ‘God will help you’ you are acting disloyally to God. For you should understand that God has sent you to aid the needy person, not to refer him back to the Almighty.”

Rabbi Chaim of Sanz (Hasidic sage) said: “The merit of charity is so great that I am happy to give to 100 beggars even if only one might actually be needy. Some people, however, act as if they are exempt from giving charity to 100 beggars in the event that one might be a fraud.”

Orhot Zaddikim, anonymous, 16th century

Giving habitually rather than sporadically is ultimately more beneficial.

A person who gives a thousand gold pieces to a worthy person is not as generous as one who gives a thousand gold pieces on a thousand different occasions, each to a worthy cause.

Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810-1883) founder of the Mussar movement that emphasized ethical self-improvement once said: “A person should be more concerned with spiritual than with material matters, but another person’s material welfare is his own spiritual concern.”

Tzedakah Activities

Activity 1: Text Study

Divide women into study groups and read through the classical sources material on tzedakah. They should focus on these texts.

1. Why do the rabbis think that tzedakah is so central to the Jewish value system?
2. Historically, the mitzvah of tzedakah was fulfilled by "maaser," the giving of one-tenth of all yearly produce. This developed from the central principle that all of life's bounty was a gift from God, and it was an obligation to return a portion as a sign of appreciation. Do you think that this is a relevant equation today?
3. How should individuals determine what percentage they should allocate for tzedakah?
4. Should Jewish matters have priority when determining where we give tzedakah?
5. What are Maimonides' eight steps of charity? Do you think that they make it easier or more difficult to give tzedakah?

Activity 2: Making Tough Decisions: What/Who do we support?

Divide the women into smaller groups and determine the allocations for their sisterhoods. Have them come together at the end and discuss their decisions.

Issue: Your sisterhood has determined that it can dispense \$13,000 this year in tzedakah allocations. How will you determine the disbursements from the following requests?

- The local Jewish senior home is in dire need of roof repair. Many of your members have family and friends in the home. They have no money and are requesting assistance from local Jewish organizations. The cost of the repairs: \$15,000.
- The synagogue needs to fix the social hall that is used for simchas and various events, generating necessary income for its coffers. The cost of the renovations: \$50,000.
- The Israel scholarship program in your synagogue has been greatly depleted and this year five college students have requested financial aid for study in Israel.
- The women's shelter in your community needs funds to offset the growing influx of mothers and children. As the community's support diminishes by the month, the need is growing.
- The volunteer fire department in your community needs to purchase new equipment and uniforms. They have appealed to various local organizations for support. The cost of new supplies: \$40,000.
- The Hebrew school's budget has been slashed but grades 3-6 are in desperate need of new books. They have appealed to the sisterhood for help. The cost of the new books: \$4,800.
- The synagogue needs to restore three of its Torah scrolls that are unusable and in need of repair. The cost of the repairs: \$6,300.

Eight Degrees of Charity

Rambam, Hilchot Mat'not Ani'im 10:1,7-14

Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Gifts of [that belong to] the Poor

We are required to take more care about the mitzvah of tzedakah than for any other positive mitzvah. For the mitzvah of tzedakah is the sign of the righteous descendents of Abraham our father, as "[God] has made known to him [Abraham], so that he shall command his sons to do tzedakah." (Genesis 18:19). The throne of Israel is not established, nor does true faith stand except through tzedakah, for "through tzedakah will I [God] be established." (Isaiah 54:14) And Israel will not be redeemed except through tzedakah, for "Zion will be ransomed through judgment and returned through tzedakah." (Isaiah 1:27)

1. There are eight levels of *tzedakah*, each greater than the next. The greatest level, above which there is no other, is to strengthen the name of another Jew by giving him a present or loan, or making a partnership with him, or finding him a job in order to strengthen his hand until he needs no longer [beg from] people. For it is said, "You shall strengthen the stranger and the dweller in your midst and live with him," (Leviticus 25:35) that is to say, strengthen him until he needs no longer fall [upon the mercy of the community] or be in need.
2. Below this is the one who gives tzedakah to the poor, but does not know to whom he gives, nor does the recipient know his benefactor. For this is performing a mitzvah for the sake of Heaven. This is like the Secret Office in the Temple. There the righteous gave secretly, and the good poor drew sustenance anonymously. This is much like giving tzedakah through a tzedakah box. One should not put into the box unless he knows that the one responsible for the box is faithful and wise and a proper leader like Rabbi Hananya ben Teradyon.
3. Below this is one who knows to whom he gives, but the recipient does not know his benefactor. The greatest sages used to walk about in secret and put coins into the doors of the poor. It is worthy and truly good to do this if those who are responsible for collecting *tzedakah* are not trustworthy.
4. Below this is one who does not know to whom he gives, but the poor person does know his benefactor. The greatest sages used to pack coins into their scarves and roll them up over their backs, and the poor would come and pick [the coins out of the scarves] so that they would not be ashamed.
5. Below this is one who gives to the poor person before being asked.
6. Below this is one who gives to the poor person after being asked.
7. Below this is one who gives to the poor person gladly and with a smile.
8. Below this is one who gives to the poor person unwillingly.

