

## The Jewish Concept of Charity

Rabbi Irving Luchans

Charity becomes a very popular word around this time of year. Congregations ask their members for donations above and beyond dues, Jewish organizations ask for donations for orphanages, schools, elder centers. The list goes on. In addition to money, many ask for our time. Ultimately, we read in the Yom Kippur service that Repentance, Prayer and Charity will avert the Evil Decree, meaningless death. With all this emphasis on giving charity, I thought it would be worthwhile to ask, "What is charity in Jewish terms?" I know you have heard about "Jewish style food" and you have heard people say, "She doesn't look Jewish" and may have said yourself "That name doesn't sound Jewish." Somehow, these terms make sense to us. But charity? Jewish style charity? It seems over the line, too ethnocentric, prideful, doesn't it? Well, it's not. The Western, American word, charity, means to help those in need, specifically the poor, the ill and the abandoned. The word charity is derived from the Latin Caritas which means dearness or affection. Thus, charity can be considered as personal kindness to those less fortunate, the Haves taking pity on the Have-nots and stooping to give succor

The universally accepted Hebrew word usually translated as charity is "Tzedakah. It is derived from the Hebrew word Tzedek which means righteousness and justice. Thus, tzedakah means charity and righteousness, charity and justice. The charity that the Rabbis of the Talmud talked about was more acts of justice than aiding or assisting someone in need. Tzedakah is an individual act as an expression of a person's sense of responsibility to the community and communal ethos, not an act of personal kindness out of one's heart like caritas. In his Mishneh Torah, Maimonides states:

"We are obligated to be more scrupulous in fulfilling the mitzvah of tzedakah than any other positive commandment, because tzedakah is the sign of the righteous person."

Therefore, charity, in a Jewish sense, is a duty, not an option or whim. Judaically, it is a way of relating to God just as are all the other 613 mitzvot.

There are three aspects of tzedakah, Jewish charity, I would urge you to remember. First, charity is not meant to make the giver feel good or important for having helped somebody less fortunate, and the receiver feel humbled and obligated. Charity is about an individual performing one of the 613 Torah mitzvot while still preserving the dignity of the receiver of charity. The sage Rabbi Yannai saw a poor man being given money in public. Rabbi Yannai commented that it would have been better if the charitable had given nothing than to have so humiliated the needy person.

Secondly, tzedakah makes us realize we are part of a community to which we have obligations. In Leviticus we are told not to harvest the corners of the field, for they are for the poor and the stranger. Notice that we are not told how much to leave; that is, how much charity to give. Elsewhere, however, we are admonished not to give so much that we ourselves become needy and objects of charity.

Thirdly, in Judaism, we don't judge or consider others as being inferior because they need to receive tzedakah. On the contrary, Maimonides postulated that there were eight degrees of

charity. The eighth was helping the needy to become self-sufficient. Some people will become self-sufficient over time with help, and some will always need to receive assistance, but all people have dignity and deserve to be treated so.

I have always believed that Judaism is a WE religion. Moses was given the Torah at Sinai, but We received it. I pray, but We compose a minyan. I repent, but We make things right by talking them out between us and resolving our differences. I give to tzedakah, but We are a charitable people who take care of each other.

Tzedakah helps to bind us together communally. As we welcome in the New Year, we need to remember that we all belong to a Jewish community. Just as that community and its institutions have responsibilities toward us, it is our mitzvah to support it, its institutions and each other.

May we all share a sweet New Year of peace, blessings and community. Leshana tova tikatevu!  
Amen.

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