

The March of Dimes

When the polio epidemic was raging, President Roosevelt initiated a campaign for children to make small donations. Who else implemented small donations, and from where do charity boxes originate?

A Child's Dime

Good Shabbos!

Recently, there has been lots of good news. There is a vaccine for COVID; not only from one company, but from several. Soon enough, we might just pass this crisis.

The last vaccine to wipe out a disease in the United States was the polio vaccine. In the 1920's, there was a raging polio epidemic and many children suffered terribly, yet there was no known cure.

In January of 1938, President Roosevelt made a fundraising campaign to fund research for a cure. He turned to every American child and asked that they put a dime in an envelope and send it to the White House. It was 'Kids for Kids.' The program became very popular, and was called, "the March of Dimes."

At the end of the month, on his birthday, Roosevelt gave a live address. He shared that thousands of envelopes had been streaming to the White House. Forty thousand envelopes had arrived the day before, and even more had arrived that day.

Mail trucks were constantly arriving at the White House unloading sacks of envelopes. Most envelopes had a dime, some even contained a quarter, and some had as much as a dollar. The vast majority of donations came from children.

The fundraising campaign brought in eighty-five thousand dollars. Today, the organization still exists, and they have collected seven billion dimes to-date. Many other charity organizations have adopted the same model: they request a small sum from a very wide public and collect a vast amount of money.

The First Charity Box

The value of small donations wasn't first recognized in 1938.

This week, we marked Yud Kislev, the day of the release of the Mittlerer Rebbe from Czarist imprisonment. The Mittlerer Rebbe led the Jewish community of Russia during very difficult times. During the 1800's, the Czar created the Pale of Settlement, which was basically a mass-prison, a national ghetto. Jews were confined to a specific region and were not permitted to live or travel outside of that area without express permission from the authorities.

Tens of thousands of Jews were banished from their homes in the inner Russian provinces and sent to the Pale, which was in modern day Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, Moldova and part of Poland. They were forbidden from engaging in certain areas of commerce, so as not to 'steal' the livelihood of 'upstanding Russian citizens.' Many Jews lost their homes and livelihoods in one fell swoop, and the economic situation of the Jewish

community quickly deteriorated.

One of the projects started by the Mittlerer Rebbe's father, the Alter Rebbe, was Colel Chabad, a charity organization to support the Chassidim who had moved to the Land of Israel a generation earlier. Each Chassid would donate a specific amount each week and the Alter Rebbe set up sophisticated system to collect the funds and dispatch them to the community in Israel.

With the economic deterioration of the Jewish community, the future of Colel Chabad was put into jeopardy. By the time the collector would arrive each week, the average Chassid would have no money left to donate. So, the Mittlerer Rebbe proposed a novel idea: each home should have a charity box.

In those days, charity boxes were common in public places like synagogues. Homes did not commonly have a box of their own. But the Mittlerer Rebbe instructed that each Chassid affix one such box to the wall near his kitchen table, and drop several coins in before each meal (and the women - before they lit Shabbos candles). After a month's time, the collector would visit the home, and the entire family would join as they opened the box, counted the money, and sent it off to Israel.

Families in those days didn't have three meals a day, with an additional session of tea and biscuits in the afternoon. They ate twice a day, so twice a day they placed money in the charity box. The Mittlerer Rebbe explained that before a person thinks about his own wellbeing, it would be worthy to think about the wellbeing of another. Through this act of charity, you essentially

thank G-d for providing you with the means to support your own family. This is 'Thanking by Giving!'

This charity box, known in Yiddish as a Pushka, spread throughout the Jewish communities of Europe, and since then every Jewish home contains a charity box. This is a uniquely Jewish feature of a home; I'm not aware of any other society that has a similar custom. Yet every Jewish family makes sure to have a charity box on prominent display, just like Shabbat candlesticks, Menorah etc.

Charity vs. Tithing

In this week's Parsha, Yaakov leaves his ancestral home of Be'er Sheva to travel to Charan. He stops off on the way to rest, and dreams of angels climbing up and down a ladder. G-d reveals Himself to him and gives him wonderful blessings. "I will be with you, I will watch over you wherever you go," and so on.

Moved by G-d's promise, Yaakov made a vow.

"If G-d will be with me and protect me, feed me and clothe me, and return me safely to my father's house, I will make this stone into a house for G-d and *I will tithe all of my belongings.*" (Vayetze 28).

What is unique about tithing? How is it different than ordinary charity?

The answer is the following:

Charity takes place when the need arises. When you meet a pauper on the road or when you are solicited for a donation, the

Torah obligates you to do your best to help.

But tithing is different. Yaakov teaches us that a person should seek out the Mitzvah. You should set aside a percentage of your money for charity, regardless of the immediate need, whether or not a pauper is at your doorstep. You must always set aside charity, and when the need arises – when the pauper or the community organization comes knocking – you will give him from those funds. And if they don't reach out, it is your personal obligation to seek them out instead.

That is the fundamental idea of a charity box: to give charity even when charity is not immediately necessary.

In Each Act

In recent years, charity organizations have focused more on modern fundraising methods and charity boxes have become less common. But the Rebbe encouraged every person to have a charity box in his home, business, and even vehicle. He said that it was a source of blessing for the location: it would bring success to your business, protect you from car accidents, and in a hospital, bring healing to the sick.

The Rebbe especially emphasized its importance for children. He made a specific campaign for every Jewish child to have a personal charity box in their room to become accustomed to giving charity. Whenever the Rebbe would meet children, he would give them a coin and send them over to the charity box to place it inside. Often, he would thank them afterwards. There were times when he arrived at his office only to be greeted by thirty or forty children. The Rebbe would patiently give a coin to

each one, even to babies, and would even make an effort to place a coin inside the hand of a newborn child.

Each time a Jew gives charity, the Rebbe often said, even if only ten cents, it constitutes a separate Mitzvah. It's not how much you gave that matters. It's how many times you gave. Because each act of giving hastens the final redemption.