

# Charity—Who Goes First?

*We often get excited about charitable affairs on a national scale or even around the world. But what about the poor of our own city? Who does Judaism view as most important?*

## **The Bielsky Group**

Several years ago, a movie called Defiance was released, telling the story of the Bielski brothers – Jewish partisans who fought against the Nazis during WWII, saving the lives of over 1,200 Jews. One of those Jews was actually a prominent Chabad Chasid named Zushe Vilmovsky. He too had been a partisan with this Bielski group as a young teenager.

At that time, there were many non-Jewish partisan groups whose entire mission was to attack the German military. However, the primary goal of Tuvia Bielsky's group was not to attack the Germans but rather, to rescue Jews from the ghettos and work camps. The other partisan groups were composed mostly of fighting men, but the Bielski partisan group was composed of men, women and children—entire families.

However, Tuvia Bielsky's brother, Zushe, constantly argued with him over this policy. Every time Tuvia would bring more people, especially women, children and the elderly, to their secret camp in the woods, Zushe would ask, "Why do you accept them? How are we going to feed so many mouths? They're becoming a burden on the entire group! These people aren't productive and they're not able to fight!"

Still, Tuvia Bielsky insisted on accepting them. He argued that they were Jews and could not be abandoned.

## **Good vs. Good**

Such dilemmas were commonplace during the war: Do we allow one more person into the group and endanger everyone? Or do we protect ourselves and leave him to an uncertain fate? These are serious dilemmas—and thank G-d we live in a different world and different times in which we do not need to face such questions.

However, even in our generation there are dilemmas of daily life, and it is often hard to know the right thing to do.

For example, everyone gets dozens of donation requests. We all get letters from organizations in Israel, the Former Soviet Union and other places for causes like poor people, orphans, yeshivos, and so on. We also get letters for organizations and poor people in our own cities. But money is a limited resource, and everyone only has a certain amount that they can give to charity.

So now we have the question: Who should we give to? Who is more important?

When a person must decide between right or wrong, it's not much of a moral problem—it's clear what the person must do. The only question is whether the person will find the inner strength to overcome the urge to do the wrong thing.

However, when it comes to deciding between two acts of good, a person is faced with two choices, and he or she must choose one. And here is where the debate begins. Here is where we can

ask, “What is the right thing to do?”

Fortunately, we Jews have a clear-cut answer—right in this week’s Torah portion.

## **The Poor Among You**

In Parshas Mishpatim (Shmos 22:24), we are taught: “When you lend money to My people, to the poor man among you, do not press him for repayment; do not take interest from him.”

Our Sages break down this verse into three clauses: “My people”, “the poor man,” and “among you.”

“My People” teaches us that if a Jew and non-Jew come to you to borrow money, one is to lend to the Jew first. This is not because we don’t care about non-Jews! This is just because we take care of our own people first.

“The poor man” teaches us that if a poor man and a rich man come before you, the poor man comes first.

“Among you” teaches us that if a relative who is a poor man and a poor stranger from your city come before you, the relative comes first. Likewise, if a poor man from your city and a poor man from another city come before you, the local poor man comes first.

In short, if two people come before you, a Jew and a non-Jew, the Jew comes first. Again, this does not mean that we hate the non-Jew or that we do not have to help the non-Jew—it only means that the Jew comes first. And within the Jewish People itself, when you have a poor man and a rich man, the poor man

comes first, and when you have two poor people and one is a relative and the other is not, the family member comes first.

## **It Took a Village**

Essentially, what our Sages are teaching us is that charity begins at home, with those closest to us.

Judaism frowns upon running away from one's natural habitat—upon running away from one's birth community—and flying off to the furthest extreme possible trying to save all of humanity or rescuing the people of Darfur, while those closest to him or her need help. Such behavior, having pity on those faraway while neglecting those who are close by, is certainly not tzedakah—which is why Jewish law tells us that saving the world starts at home. Eventually, the circle widens and includes people less close to you, but it begins with family.

But there's more. The Rebbe once wrote a letter to someone who wanted to help save the world. The Rebbe explained to him why he needs to help Jewish people first.

“The fact is, you were born to Jewish parents who raised you, and they were helped in raising you by many other Jews—and everything that you have is only possible thanks to them... so at the very least, you need to pay your debt to the people who surrounded you and helped you become a person who is capable of helping other people. Only after that is there place for concern who you should help.”

We've all heard the expression, “It takes a village to raise a child.” A person does not grow up in a vacuum. The fact that a

person grows up in a certain way, with certain feelings and with moral standards of helping others, comes from somewhere. Someone taught the person these feelings and standards. Someone served as a role model so that the person would grow up to be an upstanding man or woman. There was a Jewish school for him, a JCC, synagogue youth clubs, and an entire environment.

That's why the Rebbe said that a person has an obligation to first pay all his debts to the community who raised him and gave him the possibility to be the morally upright person that he is today, and only then turn to other causes.

In the Talmud (Tractate Taanis 23a), there is the well-known story of Choni HaMaagal, Choni the Circle-Maker. While walking, Choni once met a man planting a carob tree. Choni asked him, "How many years does it take until the tree grows fruit?" The man answered, "Seventy years." Choni asked him, "Do you think you'll enjoy those fruits?" The man answered, "Just as my fathers planted for me, so too, I plant for my sons."

Here too, people invested and built a community for you so that you'll have a place to grow up. Thus, you too need to concern yourself with the next generation so that they too will have a place to flourish and grow.

## **Your Battle Position**

But really, there's an even deeper idea here.

In Tehillim (Psalms), King David tells us, "Man's steps are formed by G-d." The Alter Rebbe explained this verse to mean

that wherever a Jew ends up, it was intended by G-d so that he can do a mitzvah there or help another Jew there.

This means that if you live in a certain place, it's because G-d wanted you to help people who live in that place. If G-d had wanted you to help those in other countries, then G-d would have arranged the circumstances so that you would have ended up there. The very fact that you live where you live is the best proof that your mission is to help people there.

I don't want to tell anyone what to do. I can only speak for myself. I was born in [CITY HERE]. I grew up in [CITY HERE]. And now I'm here. This is where an opportunity for outreach came up. So, the very fact that I ended up here is a sign that G-d wants me to contribute my part to the community and not chase heroics across the sea or even in the next city over.

Every time a rabbi would tell the Rebbe that he was considering leaving his community to move to a bigger Jewish community, or even to move to the Holy Land, the Rebbe would quote the Jewish law, "the poor of your city come first." If you abandon your city, you're like a deserter running from the battle, from the war against assimilation—the people in your city come first.

So for us, instead of trying to conquer mountains across the ocean or on the other side of the world, let us take care of our own instead—right here in our own backyard.