



Social Justice, not Charity

This week's Torah portion says, "tzedek tzedek tirdof." What is the Jewish approach to charity?

A Sitting Jew

Good Shabbos!

It may be hard to believe, but at least at one point in its history, Tel Aviv wasn't just a capital of Israeli secularism but also the headquarters of a real Chasidic Rebbe.

But back in the 1960s, there actually was a synagogue in Tel Aviv that belonged to a Chasidic Rebbe. He had a limited minyan of Jews who would attend services at his synagogue every day. Now, one of these regular congregants was actually a wagon driver—yes, with a live animal and all. This gentleman was a Holocaust survivor, close to 70 years old at the time, who supported himself by transporting furniture locally on his wagon.

One fine day, his horse died. The horse, of course, didn't exactly have life insurance and so our hero was left with no other source of income. When the horse died, he was left with nothing. He was a man alone, with no family or friend who could help him.

Days passed, and he tried to find work. But at that age, who would take him as an employee? Moreover, he had no skill or industry at which he was proficient (except for driving horse drawn wagons). So as it turned out, he failed to find any work.

One day, he decided to protest.

How does a Jew protest? He decided that at the morning Shacharis prayer in the synagogue, when all the congregants stood up at the Vayivarech Dovid prayer and remained standing until “Borchu,” he would remain seated. That’s what he did.

Well, one of the congregants noticed, and motioned to him to stand up. (You’re not allowed to speak during that part of the prayers.) But the man didn’t budge. So another congregant rebuked him and a third congregant gave him a light slap on the back, but he insisted on not moving.

After the services, when you’re allowed to speak again, they jumped all over him, like typical Israelis, yelling, “What is this?! You suddenly don’t know that you have to stand at certain parts of the prayers? Is this your first time visiting the synagogue?!”

So the wagon driver faced them and said, “And for the three weeks that I was sitting at home with no work, not one of you came over and said, ‘Well? What I can do to help you?’ I didn’t hear anything from you—no motion, no rebuke, no slap on the back! But here, the one time I sit through the whole davening, you all suddenly care about me!”

At the Exodus from Egypt, when it came to the Plague of darkness, the Torah describes what happened: “No man saw his brother” (Shmos 10:23). The question is asked: Why does the Torah need to tell us that nobody saw each other—in the middle of a plague of darkness? Nobody could see even their fingers in front of them! So why is it a surprise that people didn’t see each other?

What’s more, do we not know what darkness is? Every little kid cries to his or her mother, “Mommy, I’m afraid of the dark! I can’t see anything! Turn on the light!”

Rather, Torah is describing something much deeper here.

In Egypt, you didn't just have physical darkness but a social and moral darkness. "No man saw his brother" means no one had any regard for the other. Everyone was concerned only for themselves. They were narcissists and egomaniacs—that's what you had in Egypt. And when people only see themselves, that's the greatest plague of all. What's more, even after they knew and saw the suffering of the other, "No man rose from his seat"—no one got up to do something for the other guy.

That was the Plague of Darkness in Egypt. On the other hand, "And for all the Sons of Israel, there was light in their dwelling places." What does "there was light" mean? It means that they perceived one another—they were sensitive to the pain and needs of the other. And they didn't just see and say, "Oy, vey!" Rather, they got up and did something about it. (From Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau.)

How To Give Charity

This sensitivity of the Jewish Nation to "see" the needs of the other is a vision that gets down to details.

The Talmud tells us about the special behavior of the sages with the giving of charity. Rav Abba, for example, an Amora who was born in Bavel (Babylon) and moved to the Holy Land, had a very special custom in giving out charity to the poor. He would "tie coins in his handkerchief and toss them behind him, and the poor would come and take" (Tractate Kesuvos 67b).

Why did Rav Abba do this? Because he didn't want the poor to be embarrassed when he saw them collecting charity—so he put his charity money in some kind of bag over his shoulder, and the poor people came along and took, and he never knew who was taking from the bag.

More importantly, they knew that he didn't know who had taken from his bag.

The Talmud continues with the custom of another Amora who lived in Bavel: Mar Ukva.

Mar Ukva had the custom of putting four coins in the doorway of his poor neighbor every day. One day, Mar Ukva went with his wife to put the money in the doorway. But when he bent down to put the money in the doorway, the poor man opened his door just then to see who was always bringing him money. When Mar Ukva and his wife saw the poor man coming out, they quick fled to hide. Where did they hide? They climbed into an industrial oven that was still hot! (Tractate Kesuvos 67b.)

The Talmud Yerushalmi (the Jerusalem Talmud) tells us the story of Rav Yona, another Amora who lived in Tiveria. Rav Yona knew that a certain businessman in need would be embarrassed to take help. So Rav Yona came along and told him that he had heard that he, the businessman, had just received an inheritance. And so he told him, "I'll loan you money now, and when you get your inheritance, you'll pay me back." And then, after the businessman took the "loan," Rav Yona told him that it was actually a gift. (Yerushalmi, Tractate Peah 8a.)

What we see in these three stories is that Judaism "sees" the other and understands that poverty is not just an economic problem in which the person doesn't have money, but something more serious. Poverty, according to Judaism, causes a person to lose his pride, psychologically speaking, because accepting charity is a humbling and humiliating thing. So halachah (Jewish law) tells us not just how much money to give and to who, but also how to give. And for that same reason, the Talmud tells us about the Sages who looked for different ways to give charity so as not to cause embarrassment to the

receiver.

This is also expressed in a very interesting halachah.

The halachah states: “Even a poor person who is supported by charity must also give charity to another” (Maimonides, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 7:4). Why? We give charity to the poor man so that he can give it to another poor man?! It’s absurd! I can give the second poor man myself! Why do I need Poor Man #1 as an intermediary to give charity to Poor Man #2?

But the answer is simple: True, there’s no point to this economically—but it’s very important psychologically. A person who only gets but doesn’t give loses all of his human dignity—he feels degraded. The ability to give and contribute is an essential and important part in human life. And so it is incumbent upon us to give the poor man enough money to make him not just a receiver but also a giver, too. (From Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.)

G-d’s Justice

In this week’s Torah portion of Shoftim, right at the beginning, the Torah states, “Tzedek, tzedek tirdof”—justice, justice you shall pursue (Devarim 16:5). The simple meaning is that the Torah is talking about judges and courts, and so the Torah tells us here that it is incumbent upon us to do everything possible to get at the truth and ensure that there be just verdicts. But the Midrash says that the word “tzedek” (justice) has another meaning based on the word “tzedakah.”

What does “Tzedek, tzedek tirdof” mean? Says the Midrash Tana’im (Devarim 16):

“You might think that a person doesn’t need to give charity unless requested. How then do we know that one should pursue those who need charity and then give? Because the verse states, ‘Tzedek, tzedek tirdof’—meaning one should pursue charity and pursue social justice.”

When it comes to charity, it's not enough to give only when someone comes along and asks of you. Rather, one needs to pursue this mitzvah. It is incumbent upon us to seek out the poor person and to clarify who needs to be helped, because an average person will be ashamed to admit that he needs charity or a loan. And so it's not enough to look for the poor person—rather, one must pursue him.

In the maamar (Chasidic discourse) of Basi LeGani, 5718 and others, the Rebbe quotes from the Zohar, which interprets the word “tzedakah” as formed from two phrases: “tzedek” and the Hebrew letter Hei, referring to G-d—thus, “tzedakah” is really “tzedek hei,” or “G-d's Justice.”

If you want to know what G-d's Justice looks like, why, look no further than the mitzvah of tzedakah. If you want to help G-d do justice in the world... all you have to do is give tzedakah.

Good Shabbos!