



The Purpose of Poor People

What happened when Tel Aviv wanted to ban charity collecting? And why do poor people exist altogether?

The Best Israel Experience

Good Shabbos!

Has anyone here ever visited Israel? Some of you may be from Israel, or have family in (or from) Israel.

But in terms of visiting Israel, what's one thing that visitors to Israel are famous for getting excited about?

That's right: the Kotel HaMa'aravi, the Western Wall. (Dizengoff Street is very nice, and Yad Vashem is very important, but the Kotel appeals to all).

As a general rule, when Jewish tourists to the Holy Land come back home, they typically are most excited about their visit to the Western Wall—about the spiritual experience that they had upon standing at the holiest site to the Jewish People today.

Many of them also report that they met a Chabad rabbi while at the Wall, put on tefillin, or committed to light Shabbos candles, etc.

But then, they commonly also report about one thing that clouded their otherwise amazing experience—bumping into charity collectors, people who brazenly bother people while they are praying to demand donations. And making it worse, if they give something that's too little

to their liking, they complain and demand a larger amount—not leaving the person alone until he gives in. And meeting such collectors typically ruins visitors' entire Western Wall experience.

Similarly, non-religious Jews who get invited to a religious wedding in a large religious community suddenly find themselves “attacked” by brigades of collectors who go from table to table “demanding” that guests donate to charity. Now, if you grow up “Orthodox,” you’ll be used to this—but people who are not from that community, whether Jewish or not, are usually quite surprised and even outraged by such behavior.

So let’s explore this subject for a bit: why is money so touchy?

The answer is that when you’re confronted with a charity collector, you’re forced to face your inner conflict between compassion and anger.

The compassion is for a person who has fallen to such a low that he needs to personally go about and collect money for himself (or for whatever cause he’s collecting for, which is better, but not much better).

The anger, on the other hand, comes from the fact that the collector doesn’t let you think and choose and plan which charity causes you want to give your money to. On top of that, these collectors, at least in Israel at the Western Wall, often give you an attitude if you don’t give generously—and if you do give them generously, then you get angry that they used and abused you, and if you only gave them a little, they make sure to give you grief.

Old Rule or New Rule?

About 50 years ago, the City of Tel Aviv wanted to pass an ordinance that would have made it possible to keep collectors off the street because, the city argued, they were hindering pedestrian traffic and

giving the city a shabby reputation. Instead, the city wanted to give them a permanent stipend from the social-services department.

At the time, they approached Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin, of blessed memory, to provide his halachic opinion on the matter. What's interesting is that not only did Rabbi Zevin provide a Halachic ruling, he did so based on a story that he later quoted in one of his books, "Tales of Chasidim."

Here's the story that Rabbi Zevin used to formulate his halachic opinion:

When Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev was first appointed as Chief Rabbi of the city of Berditchev, he stipulated with the village elders that they were not to bother him with meetings unless they wanted to establish a new community rule. The old ones were to remain in place.

So one fine day, the heads of the community met to establish a new custom for the Jewish community: to prohibit the poor from going door to door to ask for charity. Instead, the new rule would establish that each poor person would get a set stipend from the community fund each month. And since it was a new proposal, they invited their new rabbi to the meeting.

When Rabbi Levi Yitzchak arrived, they presented the new proposal to him. But the rabbi commented, "Didn't I ask you to not bother me about old proposals?"

When they asked him what he meant, he said, "Well, this is a proposal that was established in the cities of Sodom and Amorah [not "Gomorrah," as it's commonly misrepresented—there's no "g" in the original Hebrew]! Back then, they made a law that you aren't allowed to give charity to the poor..."

Well, back to the present era, Rabbi Zevin, a “Man of Halachah,” used that story as a source with which to oppose Tel Aviv’s idea. And ultimately, the Tel Aviv City Council concluded that such a law ran counter to the spirit of the Jewish Nation, which is described as “merciful ones, sons of merciful ones.”

The Talmud on Charity

The Talmud (Tractate Bava Basra 9a) tells us about the Sage Rav Papa, who was in charge of giving out stipends to the city’s poor from the community’s funds. Rav Papa worked by the rule that had been established in the era of the Mishnah, namely, that “a poor man making his rounds of front doors is not to be helped”—meaning, that if a poor man goes independently from house to house collecting charity, the community doesn’t need to support him, because he’s independent. That’s not the case with poor people who are embarrassed to collect donations—for them, the community must provide support.

One day, a poor man who regularly made his rounds of the doors showed up at Rav Papa’s door. Rav Papa didn’t want to give him money from the community fund. But Rav Papa’s fellow Sage, Rav Sama, criticized him, saying, “If you don’t give him, no one will give him—just give him ‘a little gift,’ but don’t turn him away empty-handed.”

And the Talmud concludes, “Anyone who closes his eyes to charity is as if he worshiped idols.”

From here we learn that a person who stops you in the street and asks for a donation, it’s prohibited to ignore him. True, you don’t have to give him a lot of money—but give him “a little gift”

But some people say, and perhaps with some justification, that many collectors are really not poor at all but instead, fakers who make

themselves look like unfortunates—and as such, it's impossible to know if this “poor person” really is poor.

Along these lines, the Midrash tells us the story of two Sages, Rabbi Yochanan and Raish Lakish, who went down to the bathhouses of Tiveria (Tiberias). Once there, a poor man met them and said to them, “earn merit through me!” Meaning, earn for yourselves the merit of the mitzvah of tzedakah by donating to me.

The two Sages answered him that once they were done bathing, then they would give him charity—but when they left the bathhouse, they found the man dead. They said, “Since we did not merit to serve him in life, let us serve him in death”—meaning that they would tend to his burial, washing his body and preparing for proper burial.

But, the Midrash continues, “While they were still washing him,” meaning, purifying the body with the ritual water pourings, “they found a pouch with 600 dinars in it hanging around his neck”

Well, how do you think an ordinary person would react to that? He or she would probably say something like, “Look at this character! It's good we didn't give him anything!”

But the reaction of Rabbi Yochanan and Raish Lakish was totally different. They said, “We need to show appreciation for fakers.” Why so? “Because if not for the fakers among the Jewish Nation, if even one Jew did not give to a man asking him for charity, he would be punished immediately” (Midrash Rabbah Vayikra 34:10).

In other words, because there are liars and fakers among charity collectors, when a Jewish person doesn't give charity to a real beggar, he won't be judged by G-d as harshly because he can always argue that he thought that he was a faker who just looked like a real beggar.

The story is told of a rabbi who gave tzedakah to someone, only to hear from his son that the man was not poor at all. The rabbi said to his son, “I’m glad to hear that! I’m very happy that a Jew isn’t poor!”

Why Are There Poor People?

That brings us to the philosophical question that Turnus Rufus, the evil Roman governor of the Holy Land, asked of Rabbi Akiva: “If your G-d loves the poor, why does He not provide for them?” (Talmud, Tractate Bava Basra 10a.) In essence, the question is, if G-d loves them, then let Him see to it that they aren’t poor in the first place! Why does He cause them to be poor and expect other people to give them charity? Would it not be better if there was no poverty in the first place?

That brings us to this week’s Torah portion:

The Parshah of Beshalach is a Torah portion filled with miracles—from the Splitting of the Red Sea through the miraculous Manna from Heaven, all the way to the Battle of Amalek. And if we look at all three of these miracles, we discover an interesting phenomenon.

The miracle of the Splitting of the Sea was entirely caused by G-d. The Jewish Nation had nothing to do with it at all. As Moshe Rabbeinu himself put it in the Parshah, “G-d shall fight for you, and you shall be silent” (Shmos 14:14). This was G-d’s war, and only G-d’s war.

With the miracle of the manna, where even though the verse calls it “bread from heaven,” it was still a miracle that required effort on the part of the Jewish Nation. As the Torah tells us: “And the people shall go out and gather what is needed for the day,” and as the Torah tells us in further detail in Bamidbar (11:8): “The people walked about and gathered it. Then they ground it in a mill or crushed it in a mortar.” So with that miracle, it wasn’t entirely by G-d’s Hands—rather, it also needed some involvement of human hands, the Jewish People’s effort.

And finally, the Parshah ends with the Battle of Amalek, which also

was a miracle. However, it was a totally different miracle than that of the Splitting of the Reed Sea. With the Battle of Amalek, there was no “G-d shall fight for you, and you shall be silent”—here (Shmos 17:9), Moshe commanded Yehoshua, “Pick men for us, and go out and fight against Amalek,” meaning that they would physically need to go to actual war.

True, that “when Moshe would raise his hand, Israel would prevail,” there were miracles to be seen, but this was a battle that required the work of human hands. G-d wanted the Jewish Nation as partners in this battle, and this approach is drawn even further out in the following Parshahs, which talk about the Building of the Mishkan, etc., which all depend in their entirety upon the handiwork of Man.

Why is this so?

Become a Partner

The Rebbe explained it on many occasions: The ultimate purpose in life is that human beings make a house for G-d right here in the lowest of worlds—G-d’s greatest pleasure, so to speak, is when it is human beings who, of their own power, do the right thing. And it’s the same thing with charity, the Rebbe added—G-d created poor people so that we would have someone to give to.

In other words, G-d created the universe purposely incomplete—and He wants us to be “partners in the Act of Creation,” meaning that we be the ones who complete the world and perfect it, preparing it for the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our days, amen!

Good Shabbos!