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### JEWISH TRADITIONS OF GIVING: TZEDAKAH

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## **JEWISH TRADITIONS OF GIVING: TZEDAKAH**

"Tzedakah" is the Hebrew word for the acts that we call "charity" in English: giving aid, assistance and money to the poor and needy or to other worthy causes. One of three key Jewish values, which include chesed (kindness), tzedek (justice) and ahava (love). The Torah teaches: A world of compassion shall be built (Psalms 89:3). The Torah teaches: Justice, justice, you shall pursue (Deut. 16:20). The Torah teaches: Love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18). Comes out of Tikkun Olam: repair of the broken world.

- The verse says: "Tzedek, tzedek you shall pursue" -- justice justice you shall pursue (Deut. 16:20). There's a basic human responsibility to reach out to others. Giving of your time and your money is a statement that "I will do whatever I can to help." Tzedakah is justice in action. It means righteousness, justice or fairness. Actions of tzedakah the responsibility of all Jews
- Nature of Tzedakah different than charity, which connotes benevolence and generosity, an act of the wealthy and powerful for the benefit of the poor and needy
- Some sages have said that tzedakah is the highest of all commandments, equal to all of them combined, and that a person who does not perform tzedakah is equivalent to an idol worshipper.
- Tzedakah cornerstone of Jewish practice.
- Tzedakah begins at home. If your parents are hungry, that comes before giving to a homeless shelter. From there it is concentric circles outward: your community, then your country. (For Jews, Jerusalem and Israel are considered as one's own community, since every Jew has a share in the homeland.)
- Tzedakah is not only helping people financially, it's also making them feel good. If a hungry person asks for food, and you give it to him with a resentful grunt, you've lost the mitzvah. Sometimes giving an attentive ear or a warm smile is more important than money.
- Stories from bible illustrate Tzedakah: justice in action: Elijah comes as homeless beggar, and ends up only being treated well by righteous souls. Other stories also send home the message that you never know who is the messiah, and perhaps just the act of Tzedakah is the calling to a better age
- Traditional Jews give at least ten percent of their net income to charity. Traditional Jewish homes commonly have a pushke, a box for collecting coins for the poor, and coins are routinely placed in the box. Jewish youths are continually going from door to door collecting for various worthy causes. A standard mourner's prayer includes a statement that the mourner will make a donation to charity in memory of the deceased.
- In our congregation in Lawrence, it's customary to give \$ to the synagogue in memory, honor, or celebration of others - to thank someone for organizing the big seder, remember someone's father who just died, celebrate someone's marriage or bar mitzvah or new job. There are thousands of reasons to give regularly, and many of us do. We're expected to give our time also, and obviously, if know us, you know we easily give our opinions too.

### **Levels of Tzedakah**

Certain kinds of tzedakah are considered more meritorious than others. The Talmud describes

these different levels of tzedakah, and Rambam, Moses Maimonides -- a Jewish sage, organized them into a list. The levels of charity, from the least meritorious to the most meritorious, are:

1. Giving begrudgingly
2. Giving less than you should, but giving it cheerfully.
3. Giving after being asked
4. Giving before being asked
5. Giving when you do not know the recipient's identity, but the recipient knows your identity
6. Giving when you know the recipient's identity, but the recipient doesn't know your identity
7. Giving when neither party knows the other's identity
8. Enabling the recipient to become self-reliant - The Talmud (Baba Batra 9a) says: "Greater than one who does a mitzvah, is one who causes others to do a mitzvah." If you really want to be effective, wake others up to the problem, and mobilize their efforts. It's considered an ultimate mitzvah to help someone get to the point where he or she can perform mitzvahs for others -- our way of paying it forward.

### **Tzedakah and Stewardship:**

- According to Rabbi Bennett F. Miller: Book of Leviticus ends with *B'har/B'chukotai* - warning to remember that the earth does not belong to us; the earth belongs to the Divine. What we do - the meaning of our actions - is not about right or wrong, charity or justice. For the Torah, our human deeds reflect an understanding of who we are in relation to the Divine and the world in which we live. "Everything in life is about relationships. Are we close with our loved ones or do we keep ourselves apart? Do we engage with our neighbors or do we build barriers that separate us? Do we seek through our actions to be closer to the Divine or do we permit ourselves an estrangement that eventually leads to our own destruction and the destruction of our world?"
- This speaks to the covenant between us and God to be stewards of the earth, which calls for humility, understanding (and awareness), deep connection to where and who we are.
- In Judaism, we have the holiday of Tu B'Shevat, the de facto Jewish Earth Day but far more ancient, and it reminds us of tikkun olam - even Tu B'Shevat sedars that bring us back to our care for the earth.

**How to Know What/How To Give:** My understanding of Judaism is that interpretation -- unearthing and discovering meaning -- is at the heart of being Jewish. Our tradition of Midrash, re-interpreting biblical texts to tilt the light toward new meaning, as well as the kind of debate you would find when it's come to interpreting where the vowel is in a word, or why a certain word is repeated six times in a prayer. So I want to share how I'm interpreting Tzedakah.

I wrote a poem some years back about what we're given, and what we must give in return:

### ***Jonah and the Tree***

You don't say you love that tree but you do.  
Are you like this with anything  
that gives you food or shade?  
Oh, all of you get more rattled  
at the sound of my voice in your satiny throats  
because you're afraid of how stupid you'll look.

But I come to tell you  
compassion always looks stupid  
to those well-fed in a shady spot  
while time bakes the earth.

Love looks stupid, too  
as if the lover had no more sense  
than to fling herself into the blank sky  
she would soon fall out  
like you, Jonah, back to the land  
where a tree may mean all  
because it makes you the god of it.

But if you lay there long enough  
in the rain, you will remember how  
the wet ground stretches itself open,  
makes earth and sky the inside of a whale,  
night unrolling into day,  
day unrolling into night  
in its old migration  
back to me.

Once you can have gone so far,  
how can you not let others return?

How can we know what a person or community truly needs when people are so complicated, their wounds and losses so individual and multi-layered, and life itself is so surprising and variable? How do we help others help themselves, the highest level of tzedakah? Some things to consider in cultivating a life of Tzedakah:

- **Motive:** What is your truest motive for giving? Often, we're motivated by both our own egos and a sense of deep altruism. Nothing wrong with multiple motives, but being aware of them helps us better see how to give, even if part of the reason is that it makes us feel better about ourselves. When I give a dollar to a homeless guy on Mass. St., am I doing it because I feel guilty at having so much when he has so little, or because it makes me feel like a good person, or because I want to help, or -- more likely -- all of the above?

- **Discernment:** Sit what opportunity, feel out, think through, walk and dream on what's the true way to help here. Any of us who are parents of young adults, like we are, know so well how it's hard to know what advice or money or other help to give to our 21-year-old in crisis over a lost job or lost love or lost semester at college.
- **Where is the greatest mitzvah here:** Relating to discernment and motive, we can ask ourselves what is the greatest level of a good deed here. Sometimes giving money anonymously to someone who struggles to ask for help is the greatest mitzvah. Sometimes, it's bringing a tray of spinach enchiladas and some brownies to someone who feels alone and needed to be reminded of his/her friends.
- **Listening & Witnessing Versus Pitying and Rescuing:** Related to all I just discussed is the need to cultivate our ability to listen to others -- what they are saying and not saying, and witness them -- see them for all you know them to be, not just who how they are in this moment of great vulnerability. Pitying and rescuing is based on a premise that we know what another needs, and also that we can close off our heart -- harden it, to use biblical terms -- and not risk anything by looking down on them from our more privileged perch, and dole out advice or other "gifts" we believe will save them. In facilitating writing workshops for 20 years with many groups, esp. people living with serious illness, I tell my workshop participants we're here to listen to and witness each other, not fix each other. This requires of us engagement in the continue practice of opening up our heart, feeling our own vulnerability, and finding the empathy that connects us, and then asking how we can help.
- **Showing up:** My people are famous for this -- story of Forest in pediatric intensive care. This also grows all the other qualities I mentioned.
- **Dwelling in not-knowing:** Whenever we give, we don't know if our gift will do any good. The dollar I give to the guy on Mass. St. might go to drugs that lead to an overdose. Or maybe to a hot meal that revives him, and helps him connect with his innate strength and courage. The advice I give to my daughter might be just what she needs to hear, or not. Even showing up can, on occasion, feel like an intrusion. We never know. Persian Sufi poem Rumi writes:

If you are here unfaithfully with us,  
you're causing terrible damage.  
If you've opened your loving to God's love,  
you're helping people you don't know  
and have never seen.

I tell my husband, when it comes to our ecological and community-building efforts, "We won't know if we did the right thing until after we're dead." All we can do is do our best and...

- **Converse with the calling of the moment:** Every moment has its calling. Listen. Breathe. Feel out where your learning edge is - kind of like the edges we work in yoga -- where you're working just beyond your usual capacity but not tipping over into injury, and through working our edges, building strength, flexibility and endurance. All of this translates into resilience -- an ability to engage with life fully, rolling with the punches, and finding our innate ability to grow open our hearts, minds and spirits as we go through our own injuries, losses, brokenness. Out of resilience, we can better converse with the moment we're in, the person or community we're with, and divine how to do

our tiny part to repair the broken world. Tikkun Olam.