

In Dvarim 15:11 we learn that poor people will never cease to be among the Israelites once they enter the land. Since leaving Egypt, the Israelites have been living a utopian existence, despite all their kvetching: anything they need is given to them: food falls from the sky, clothes and shoes don't wear out, housing is provided for them at each campsite in the form of sukkot; only when they cross the river into Eretz Canaan will they have to provide for themselves. It is this vulnerable moment that Moshe chooses to remind the Jewish people that not everyone will provide for themselves successfully, and there will always be poor among them.

I want to talk about the classic 8-level hierarchy of Charitable giving created by Maimonides in Chapter 10 of his Mishneh Torah. We all think we know it, and we all know in general that, as the common saying goes, better than giving a man a fish, is TEACHING him to fish. But I want to go inside those 8 stages of tzedakah more in detail and really examine the distinctions between them.

At the very top is to grant the needy a loan, or to enter into a business partnership with him or her, or help them find employment. This is the proverbial "teaching him to fish". Becoming self-supporting is the ultimate goal of every person, and the source of much of our individual self-esteem. My father would always say, if he heard of a kid graduating with a Liberal Arts degree in history, "so, are you going to open a History Store?" This is our automatic response: can our kids learn a skill to support themselves? Can every person be independent? Poverty is understood to be a psychological condition, as well as a material one. Independence creates self-respect, whereas dependence creates a state of humiliation. To extend this idea, even a poor person who is dependent upon tzedaka him or herself, is commanded to give tzedaka to others, because self-esteem is enhanced by the act of

helping someone else become more independent; so connected are self-esteem and independence.

If this ideal of helping a poor person become independent can't be achieved, the next best thing is to give assistance in such a way that both the giver and the recipient remain unknown to each other. Again, the goal is to maintain self-respect and avoid humiliation between fellow human beings. Today this is most commonly achieved when tzedaka is given to a charitable fund of the community. When we give tzedaka to STEP, for example, we don't know who will benefit, and they don't know who gave the gift they are receiving. Dignity is maintained.

Third is a level clearly lower, more psychologically troubling, than the previous two: the donor is aware of whom the recipient is, but the recipient is unaware of the benefactor's identity. This could lead to a bad power situation, as the donor is in possession of a secret and the recipient remains in the dark. Legends abound whereby righteous people would secretly leave coins on the doorsteps of the needy during the night, their identity never to be discovered by the recipients. The moral of these stories is always about the holiness of the donors; never how it makes the poor people feel! In a small community, where everyone is known and general financial conditions are there to be seen, this is clearly less desirable than a double-blind situation.

Continuing down the ladder, if a donor does not know the identity of the recipient of his tzedaka, but the recipient knows the identity of the donor, there is again an uneven social situation, an imbalance in power. The recipient of such assistance will feel awkward toward the donor, and the donors themselves don't understand the source of this discomfort! Again, legends tell of people who would toss coins behind them over their shoulders, so as not to see who picks them up. And again, this technique may work better for the donors than for the recipients. Rabbi Goldberger once re-told a story of a Rabbi who was

told by his student that someone hated him passionately, and the Rabbi said, “that’s impossible. It can’t be that so-and-so hates me so fiercely”. The student asked the Rabbi, “how can you be so sure”? and the Rabbi replied, “because I have never done that person a favor”. The implication being, that receiving something, being embarrassed to need such help, can make the recipient resent the giver. So in this case, if the recipient knows and resents the donor (or at the very least, feels awkward around the donor), and the donor doesn’t even know that his or her gift went to that person, it will create difficult social dynamics.

Next level down, one who gives money directly to the poor before being asked. As it says in the parsha, in 15:11, “ki pato’ach tiftach et yad’cha lo”, you should have an open hand toward the poor. This applies in a sort of sanitized version, to many of us who commonly give donations to mark happy events or wishes for refu’ah shleima, or to express condolences and give tzedaka in someone’s memory. This type of charity really shouldn’t be below the others; rather, it’s a question of the donor’s motivation. Such donations can still fall into the various categories listed above, anonymous on one or both sides, etc. As the person who writes acknowledgement letters for our shul for such donations, I can tell you that, although it is pretty far down on Maimonides’ heirarchy, this concept of tzedaka (although not as literal as imagined by Maimonides) is certainly embraced by our community, and that’s a good thing!

Below this, for obvious reasons, is the person who gives only in response to being asked. Although this implies that without the request, the donor wouldn’t give at all, I’m not so sure. Again, this is very common today. On a direct and personal level, we have the scene that plays out in our community every Sunday morning on many of our doorsteps: “schnorrers” come to plead their case for their yeshiva or their family or the poor in their Jerusalem neighborhood, and we respond. At the macro level, we have a federated community

campaign, where people ask their friends and associates for an annual gift to the community agencies. No one thinks poorly of those who answer the door or the phone call, and respond with a gift. But in Maimonides' scheme, it would have been better if we volunteered our gift before that knock on the door or that phone call.

Below this, and here it becomes clear that these levels are less respectable, is the person who gives graciously but less than he or she should give, and at the very bottom, the person who gives grudgingly. Here Maimonides doesn't specify if the grudging donor is giving up to his or her capacity, or is being cheap besides being crabby. He also doesn't indicate whether that grudging donor is giving anonymously, or in a double-blind way, before or after being asked. I guess whatever good may accrue from the act of giving, can be nullified by a bad attitude. The joke is told about the pair of shul solicitors who go visit a wealthy man. They ask him for a nice donation to the Building Fund, and he replies, "Uh-huh. I bet you don't know about my widowed mother who needs full-time help. And you may not know about my unemployed sister with 3 daughters to marry off. And you probably are unaware of my nephew with special needs in an expensive day-treatment program. So, if I don't give to any of them, why should I give to YOU?!" ...

Bottom line is, we recognize poverty's eternal presence among us, but Judaism doesn't romanticize poverty; we don't consider it noble or closer to God. The Rabbis have described poverty as equal to all the other curses listed in the book of Dvarim put together. Tzedaka is commanded, and the method of giving tzedaka is too important to leave up to chance. We talk about giving, we sometimes obsess over giving; we even have an entire field of endeavor called philanthropy. In addition to his detailed listing of the levels of giving, the Rambam drives home the point in a very down-to-earth and Jewish way when he says

in his Guide to the Perplexed, “The Wellbeing of the soul can only be obtained after that of the body has been secured.”

Shabbat shalom