

צדקה Tzedakah

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Tzedakah - "righteousness" - generally refers to the giving of money to help support those in need and the helping institutions of one's community. Tzedakah is a religious obligation, distinct from the notions of charity or philanthropy, which are related to the concept of love, and which are given out of the goodness of one's heart. Tzedakah is given out of the understanding that all things in the world belong to God, the Creator, and that we are merely caretakers of the material things we possess. Each person has the right to have his or her basic needs met. If one cannot meet those needs on their own, then it is the community's responsibility to help.

מקורות From our Sources

From the Holiness Code (Torah):
When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the Eternal your God. (Lev. 19:9-10)

From the Sages (Talmud)
One who gives even a prutah to the poor is privileged to sense God's presence (Baba Batra 10a).

Blessing for the Study of Torah:

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו לעסוק בדברי תורה.

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, vitzivanu la'asok b'divrei Torah.

Blessed are You, our Eternal God, Ruler of the Universe, Who makes us holy through mitzvot, and commands us to engage in the study of Torah.

פרשנות Commentary

Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon (1135-1204), otherwise known as Maimonides or the Rambam, was one of the few medieval Jewish philosophers who also influenced the non-Jewish world. Even today he is among the most respected of all Jewish philosophers.

The Rambam organized the levels of Tzedakah into a "ladder," progressing from the least meritorious to the most. The levels are:

1. Give reluctantly
2. Give less than you should, but give it cheerfully.
3. Give after being asked
4. Give before being asked
5. Give knowing the recipient's identity, although the recipient does not know your identity
7. Give when neither party knows the other's identity
8. Help the recipient to become self-reliant

The Kli Yakar (1550-1619) is the pen name of Ephraim Solomon of Luntschitz. He was renowned for his fiery and brilliant sermons, in which he spared no sector. He bullied the rich for not being more generous, criticizing their pretensions of religious status based on finance rather than on deeds. At the same time he accused the poor of not doing enough to help themselves and relying on charity:

Because we have found that in the discussion of Tzedakah, words are repeated: "you shall surely tithe" (Deuteronomy 14:22), "you shall surely give" (Deuteronomy 15:10), "you shall surely open your hand" (Deuteronomy 15:8), "you shall surely lend" (Deuteronomy 15:8), the reward is correspondingly doubled: "I will surely bless you." Accordingly, we see that Tzedakah has two aspects: giving with the hand and consolation with the mouth so that the heart not be embittered. The donor should give with a pleasant expression and with a full heart and the beggar should not hear rebuke.

שיחה For Discussion

In giving Tzedakah, we work as partners with God to share the bounty of creation and assure that all people's needs are met. As a mitzvah—a religious obligation—it is not only expected that each Jew, even the poorest, will give Tzedakah, but do so with the proper spirit. One should not in any way look down on the recipient of Tzedakah, because they, like us, are equal members of the community, and equally created in the Divine image. In fact, we are to honour the recipients of Tzedakah because, without them, we would not have the opportunity to fulfill this important mitzvah.

- 1) What kind of blessings are received by one who gives Tzedakah?
- 2) To fulfill Maimonides' highest level of Tzedakah, how can we help others to become more self-reliant?
- 3) What institutions exist in your community to help distribute Tzedakah and assure that all members's needs are met?

