



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

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THE MITZVAH OF TZEDAKAH

On the surface, the mitzvah of tzedakah (the commandment to give) is a very simple one. The Book of Deuteronomy says, “If there is a needy person among you don’t harden your heart, don’t shut your hand against your needy kin. For there will never cease to be people with need in your land which is why I command you to open your heart to the poor and to the needy kin in your land.” According to the Torah there are simply people in need out there, and our job as human beings and as Jews is to help them to meet their needs, to help them live lives of dignity and fullness. It is our sacred privilege to provide sufficient food, shelter, education and care so that children grow up to be productive and healthy adults, so that healthy and productive adults are able to keep the community and their families together, and so that seniors are able to reap a rich harvest from all the years that they have already striven to make our world a possibility.

On the surface, the Torah is very simple. I am struck, however, by its choice of terms: twice the verse in Deuteronomy says, “don’t harden your heart.” Ask yourself: in the Bible, whose heart is hardened? Let’s recall that Moses goes into Egypt, and says “Let my people go,” and Pharaoh’s heart is hardened.

When the Torah says, “Don’t harden your heart to those who are needy in your midst,” the Torah is quoting itself. The timeless symbol of someone whose heart is hard is Pharaoh. Any Jew who can look at a human being in need and not hear God’s call to let my people go, to do something, becomes a Pharaoh. You don’t have to *be* evil to be on the side of evil. You simply have to remain indifferent. All that it takes for goodness to be vanquished is for us to ignore the suffering and desperation of our fellow human beings. To fail to act is all it takes to create a society of inequity and of callousness. Refusing to lend a hand, we become the Pharaohs of our age.

On the surface, the mitzvah of tzedakah appears simple and straightforward: don’t let yourself be the Pharaohs of this age. If God has blessed you with abundance and with resources, it is your duty as Jews to hear the cries of your fellow human beings. It is your duty to do something about it. In fact this simple mitzvah is anything but simple. The Midrash (ancient rabbinic commentary) notices there is a contradiction between two Biblical verses. On the one hand, the Book of Deuteronomy says that there will not always be poor among you (15:4), and on the other hand a few verses later it says the very opposite: there will always be poor in your midst (15:11). The rabbis say that

determining which verse applies to our community is in our hands. When we live our lives in a godly way, when we go out, roll up our sleeves, and make the world a better place, then we make sure that there are no needy among us. But if we harden our hearts, if we shut ourselves off to what God would have us do with our lives and our resources, then, indeed, the poor will never go away.

There is a deeper level to the mitzvah of tzedakah. In truth, tzedakah is not about *giving*; tzedakah is about *being*. Let's reflect together about who we truly are. The Torah begins by telling us that we are *b'tzelem Elohim*, made in God's image. What a striking phrase! None of us look alike, so the image of God can't be a physical likeness. What, then, is the essence of God's image? What does it mean to be God's image in the world? Jewish tradition teaches that what is essentially divine about God is that God loves unconditionally and that God's giving is gratuitous. We don't earn God's bounty; God gives simply for the joy of giving. To be God-like means to give, and to be free means to have what to give. The slaves in Egypt, the slaves in our time, are people who don't have the capacity to reach out and give. To be free means to be able to love and to give. We are reflections of that divine image, which means that when we rise up in our freedom and we offer gifts of love, caring, and support then we are most God-like. That is our mission in life: we are placed in this material world to bring that divine spark into the world and to share it among each other. A person who doesn't give isn't whole; a person who doesn't reach out is, in some ways, not human. The fullest expression of our humanity is possible only when we reach out to each other and we connect with each other. That is what the Federation's Super Sunday is all about. That is what this enormous bureaucracy of cards, and is all about. It is an expression of the divine image in each of us. We do it because, in our core, that is who we are and who we are summoned to be.

One other level of tzedakah: in the Torah, the first thing God says or does after the creation of to become a tailor. God expels Adam and Eve from the Garden, but the next thing God does is to sew clothing for. That gift is itself unearned: God didn't have to do that. Adam and Eve had disobeyed the Lord's command. They had rebelled against God and eaten of the fruit even though it was the only thing God told him not to do. So it's particularly remarkable that even though God insists that they have forfeited their right to live in the Garden, insisting that they have to go out in the world, even then God's love doesn't rest. God makes them suits because God sees their shame as being naked. That first act of caring is consistent with God's last act in the Torah. The last deed that God performs in the Torah is to bury Moses. Moshe is not capable of burring himself. He can't rely on his own resources, so God does it for him.

The Torah begins and ends with what our tradition calls *gemillut hasadim*, acts of loving-kindness. Those engaged in the mitzvah of tzedakah are the shimmering lights of God in our community. Through the work that we do now and through the year, we will persuade this hard and callous world that there is a God who rules, that this God insists on justice and love, and that the sovereignty of God is best demonstrated when human beings help each other.

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