

With the help of God

# ***More Blessed to Give Rebbe Nachman on Charity***

by Chaim Kramer

## **Charity Equals Hope**

"Should there be an impoverished person from your brothers or in the gates of your cities, in the Land that God gave to you; do not harden your heart and do not close your hand from your impoverished brother. Open! You should open your hand and grant him his needs, that which he requires." (*Deuteronomy 15:7-8*)

In his *Sefer HaMitzvot*, Rambam (Maimonides) lists the above as positive mitzvah 195. Commenting on this mitzvah, he writes: "We are commanded to act charitably and to strengthen the weak in order to relieve their troubles." The concepts and laws of charity are found in Rambam's monumental work, *Yad HaChazakah* (The Mighty Hand), *Hilkhot Matanot L'Aniyim*, chapters 7-10 and in *Yoreh Deah*, chapters 247-257. These teachings will be briefly presented in the early course of these essays. These teachings are drawn from the Talmud, mostly from the first chapter of *Bava Batra* and the sixth chapter of *Ketuvot*, which discuss the laws and importance of charity in our lives.

For the moment, by way of introducing the greatness of charity, we will focus upon King Solomon's writings about it. "Wealth will not help [a person] on the day of wrath, but charity saves from death" (*Proverbs 11:4*); he also writes, "Wealth acquired through wickedness is of no avail, but charity saves from death" (*ibid.* 10:2).

The Talmud compares these two verses and offers the following: the first verse is speaking of wealth acquired honestly — despite it being "kosher money" it cannot help a person on "a day of wrath," on a day when God's decree goes against him. Still, the monies that one has given to charity will stand by him to save him from "death." The latter verse refers to wealth acquired dishonestly; yet despite his sins, "charity saves from death." But, let's be honest — nobody escapes death. Ever since Adam ate from the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, death has been decreed upon all living things. What death does charity save from? The Talmud continues:

The former verse speaks of charity as saving a person from a judgment in Gehennom (hell, purgatory), while the latter speaks of charity protecting one from a horrible death. This is because the first case speaks of honest wealth, it is therefore powerful enough to protect the person from being sentenced to Gehennom as punishment for his sins, for Gehennom is a fate far worse than death. Death is a passing state, but the soul remains alive eternally. What "life" can a person have if sentenced to Gehennom? But charity saves from death, from Gehennom.

However, charity given from dishonestly earned wealth, though meritorious (since the poor

were helped) and strong enough to protect a person from a horrible death in this world, is not kosher; it has no power at all to protect the person from paying a price for his dishonesty (see *Bava Batra* 10a; Maharsha, Etz Yosef, Rif, Iyun Yaakov, etc., ad. loc.).

Thus, if even charity born from dishonestly earned money can save from a horrible end, then charity from clean, kosher, honest wealth can certainly save a person from a horrible death, and not only from Gehennom.

My father-in-law, Rabbi Zvi Aryeh Rosenfeld (1922-1978) once asked his mentor, Rabbi Avraham Sternhartz (1862-1955). The Talmud teaches that "charity saves from a horrible death." Yet what about all those who died in the Holocaust? What about those who are killed in car crashes? From explosions and bombs, etc. What about those who die after a lengthy illness which consumes the body? We've seen many charitable people die from horrible deaths! What is the "horrible death" to which the Talmud is referring? Rabbi Sternhartz replied, "The 'horrible death' mentioned in the Talmud is despair."

The depth of this answer is awesome. There is no more horrible death than one who lives in despair, one who always finds the doors of salvation closed to his appeals and attempts to break out and build a new life. One who gives charity, however, is saved from despair. Upon accepting the gift and realizing the encouragement he has just received, the gift of charity automatically saves the recipient from despair. The recipient learns that there are good and decent people "out there" who are interested in helping others, which raises his hope for a better future.

But notice that King Solomon and our Sages teach that "charity saves from death" refers to the donor, not to the recipient! For charity instills hope not only in the recipient. Giving charity implants in the donor an incredible energy, a lifeline of encouragement, support and motivation, so that the donor will move forward, to build and illumine his life — always! — with the radiance of hope.

Briefly then, charity stands for hope. Charity teaches us that there is no reason for despair, that help is waiting, that we do not have to give up. In particular, it is the donor who heightens his own awareness to, in Rebbe Nachman's words, "Never despair." Thus, "charity truly saves from death": it protects the donor from despair, from depression and from fates worse than death!

For when one contributes to another, one is actually contributing to himself, to attain and maintain self-security, a positive attitude and a joyous disposition.

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Furthermore, Rebbe Nachman teaches that giving charity invokes one of God's Holy Names, **YaBoK**. The **Y** represents *yichud* (unifications), the **B** represents *berakhah* (blessing), and the **K** represents *kedushah* (holiness) (*Likutey Moharan* II, Lesson #15). By performing the simple good deed of giving charity, not only does one banish despair, but one invokes unity and love, one invokes blessing, and one invokes morality and sanctity.

See what even a small gift can accomplish! Hope; love; unity, sanctity and blessing! Such a simple act, yet with such divine power.

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