

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

by Chaim Kramer

## **Who Deserves My Charity Check?**

Our Sages teach that there exists no material prize that is sufficient to reward a person for the performance of even one single mitzvah (*Kiddushin* 39b). This world, which is only a temporary place of habitation, for all of humanity as well as all of creation, is too insignificant to contain such a reward. Therefore, all rewards for doing mitzvot will be rewarded in the World to Come, the eternal world (*ibid.*). Now, imagine a person who performs many mitzvot - his reward transcends all the good one can envision of this world. How great a portion that person has in the eternal world. Now imagine a person who observes the *entire* Torah how immense his portion in the Future World must be!

Our Sages advise us, "Be careful with every mitzvah, a [seemingly] simple mitzvah as well as the more serious mitzvot, for you cannot know the reward for observing each mitzvah" (*Avot* 2:1). Still, our Sages statement tells us that some mitzvot are apparently greater in value than others. Observing Shabbat, for example, is compared to having observed the entire Torah! Thus, some mitzvot seem to have a greater value than others. The following mitzvot, our Sages note, are comparable to observing the entire Torah: circumcision (*Nedarim* 32a), Shabbat (*Yerushalmi, Berachot* 1:5), not worshipping idols (*Horiyot* 5a), residing in the Holy Land (*Sifri* 12), tzitzit (*Menachot* 43b) and tefillin (*Kiddushin* 35a).

There are two more: charity (*Bava Batra* 9a) and *gemilat chassadim* (acts of kindness; *Yerushalmi Peah* 1:1-2; see also *Sukah* 49b). Notice that two of the eight mitzvot (25%) reckoned equivalent to observance of the entire Torah relate to charity and charitable acts. This alone speaks for the greatness of charity.

The *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh*, the Abridged Code of Jewish Law, begins the section on the Laws of Charity with the following:

It is a positive commandment from the Torah to give charity to the poor...Charity is symbol of one who is Abraham's descendent, about whom it is written (*Genesis* 18:19), "For I know that he will command his children and their succeeding generations to perform deeds of charity and justice..." The standing of Israel cannot be firm, nor can the truth of Torah be established, except through charity...Giving charity is greater than bringing all the sacrifices...the Jews will redeemed through the mitzvah of charity...Nobody ever became poor by giving charity...nothing bad ever happens by giving charity as is written (*Isaiah* 32:17), "For the act of charity is peace." Whoever has compassion for others will be showered with compassion from Heaven....

One should never forget he is dependent upon God at all times for his livelihood. Thus, just as he seeks compassion from Heaven for himself and his family, so too, he should practice compassion by giving to the poor...A door that does not open to the poor will [be forced to] open for the doctor...Furthermore, a person should be aware that livelihood is a wheel of

fortune. Some people have material wealth, but there are no guarantees that this wealth will last. He, his children or grandchildren might encounter financial difficulties down the road. Wouldn't he want others to show compassion for him or his descendents if they need help? Additionally, it is important for a person to know that the money is, in reality, deposited with him by God. He should therefore act properly with that deposit....When a person passes away, it is the charity he gave that goes before him [to illumine his path towards the World to Come] as it is written (*Isaiah 58:8*), "Your charity will precede you...." Charity mitigates evil decrees and adds life (Chapter 34:1).

With all that is written about charity it would seem that giving a few dollars and gaining the mitzvah would be one of the simplest things to do. Jewish law suggests that one give *maaser*, a tithe of one's net income, and notes that it is preferable to give a *chomesh*, one-fifth. However, one should not give more than that, lest he give away so much of his income that he himself ends up needing charity. So, we find that charity should be given - and given with an open heart - and that one must not be overly stingy nor given to excess largesse. Yet, despite the ease with which a person can give a contribution, there seems to be a terrific battle to perform this mitzvah which has so much value. Why is that?

The Talmud teaches that we ought to be thankful for shysters; if not for them, we would be found guilty, every day, of failing to sufficiently give charity, as is written, "[The poor person] will call out to God [because you did not give charity] and you will be with sin" (*Ketuvot 68a on Deuteronomy 15:9*). Rashi explains that we are found guilty because we overlook the needs of the poor (loc. cit.). However, because there are liars and cheats, we are entitled to check out the recipient to be assured of his needs. The Midrash relates that Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish went to bathe in the hot springs of Tiberias. As they were entering, a poor man came to them and asked for a contribution. They replied that they would give him when they finished bathing. When they finished, they found the man dead. Regretting their negligence, they undertook to perform the necessary burial preparations, to do at least this last mitzvah of kindness for the poor man. As they removed his clothes to wash the corpse, they found 600 gold coins on his body! This teaches us that we are permitted to check out the worthiness of the recipient.

Thus, the law is that one who comes asking for food must immediately be fed, without any investigation of his needs. However, if someone comes asking for clothing, we are entitled to investigate the veracity of his request - even if he is naked (*Yoreh Deah 251:10*). This, in a nutshell, is a major obstacle to giving charity. There are so many causes, with so many varieties of each cause, that one needs special software to sift through the spiel offered by the plethora of charities seeking his charity dollar. Even then, there are no guarantees. As Reb Noson points out, one can only follow his heart, after much prayer and soul-searching, in order to reach the right address for charity.

Individuals require assistance. Who has priority?! The widow? the orphan? the sick? the unemployed? the disabled? Within each of these categories, there are levels upon levels of need. What about a gainfully employed person with a large family, self-sustaining, whose company folds and finds himself with no income? The examples are endless.

Then try to examine institutions, nearly all of which are worthy. What more exasperating task can there be? There is medical research - cancer, heart disease, respiratory illness, diabetes, bone and skin research, mental illness, etc. There are all sorts of hospitals. There are *bikur cholim* (visiting the sick) societies, that visit the ill and tend to their needs, as well as the needs of their families.

What about religious institutions? The local mikveh, synagogues, house of study, religious schools. Should we place emphasis on boys schools or girls schools? on primary education, secondary education or higher education? What about religious paraphernalia, lectures and seminars? Do these demand a place in charity?

What about social problems - alcoholism, drug related problems, teenage pregnancies, eating disorders, shelters for battered wives, husbands or children...? Which place deserves my charity check? Don't they all?

What about the environment? Is there any place in the laws of charity for this too? What about saving the whales, the tigers, minks and skunks? Aren't they also important to our world? After all, God created them too. Don't we also have to allocate our resources for their needs?

In contrast, there exists a plethora of unworthy people and organizations. But what is striking is that "one man's pleasure is another man's poison," or, in our context, one man's "worthy charity" is someone else's "a most unworthy one." So, what do we do? What should we do?

There's no simple answer to any of the above questions. Yet, just as God created a diverse world, He also created many diverse peoples. This is why many people gravitate to acts of kindness of a certain type and totally ignore others. Why some people are active in several fields of philanthropy while others cannot handle more than one project at a time. However, the field of charity is a huge study and there are so many areas in which we can learn what it really means to be charitable and how to best utilize our resources, As these essays progress, we will develop a deeper feeling for charity as well as how we can focus upon those areas to which we feel most attached. At the same time we will hone our ability to discriminate between what is truly unnecessary and what is truly important.

Whatever one's choices, Rebbe Nachman taught: "By giving charity, a person can be spared from injustice, oppression and misfortune (*The Aleph-Bet Book, Charity* A:37). In fact, "charity hastens one's salvation" (ibid. A:34).

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