

More Blessed to Give Rebbe Nachman on Charity

by Chaim Kramer

When reviewing Parshat Shemot we find that charity is having the compassion to help a person be released from the physical bondage and material servitude that enslaves him. Moshe asked, "What sign do I have that You will redeem the People?" God answered, "When you leave Egypt, you will serve Me upon this mountain [Sinai]." Thus, the purpose of the Exodus was to allow the Jews to rise above the material bondage offered by the Pharaohs and attractions of this world, and be free to attain the higher purpose, recognizing the Infinite God Who transcends material boundaries and limitations. This recognition enables a person to go beyond his physical boundaries and attain lofty perceptions of the infinite spiritual realms. Thus a very great act of charity is to reintroduce the person to his soul, to his ultimate purpose of life, to the greater goal than just living in servitude to wages or material pursuit.

This idea has a strong connection with last week's essay, in which we discussed Rebbe Nachman's teaching that compares giving charity to passing judgment - one has judged that the charity before him is worthy enough to warrant diminishing his own personal wealth. Furthermore, charity has the power to help us straighten out our lives by exercising our good judgment, teaching us how to direct our words and speech in a beneficial, compassionate manner, so that our speech - and prayer - has a positive effect.

When relating this to Parshat Shemot, we understand that compassion is not just about filling someone's material needs (important as that is), but about judging how to fill those needs and the long-term effects of our gift. For example, a drunk might be down and out, in need of financial help. Yet if giving him money just perpetuates his drinking, what has been gained? It is not even considered charity. This is because the main mitzvah of charity is to help support a person to get by until he can stand on his own two feet. Giving a donation to a drunk solves nothing. It is called bad judgment. Still, the Midrash teaches us that if all a person will do with his life is waste it, we must still show compassion.

A father who began selling his possessions to buy wine and get drunk. His sons were worried about him (or their inheritance - depending upon which commentary you read!) and decided to teach their father a lesson. When he got drunk, they brought him to the cemetery and left him there for dead (hoping that upon his awakening he'll realize something's amiss and join his local AA). After they left, a group of wine merchants passed by. They heard a tumult and, afraid of what was happening, left their wine in the cemetery, near the drunken man, to see what would take place in town. When the drunk awoke, he saw the wine and continued drinking. After three days, the children went to see about their father's welfare and found him "dead" drunk amidst barrels of wine. "If God does not forsake him, we must be careful to respect him too," they said, and returned home with him resolving to care for him (*Vayikra Rabbah* 12:1).

Thus not always can we reject a charity case because we think it's going nowhere, especially if we are unaware if the person had what to eat that day. However, we have the right to study each case and judge its merit before deciding whether or not to support it. In fact, we have somewhat of an obligation to do so, if we are willing to give serious money to that cause. (A small sum does not require investigation.

What is considered a "small sum" will be discussed in future essays, but as a general rule, it depends upon the case and cause of the recipient, as well as the donor's financial situation.)

When considering that charity is compared to judgment, we should present the parameters of giving - what causes are considered primary, which secondary, and so on. The list is long and, as detailed in the Codes, flexible to the extent of the requirements of the moment. For instance, the *Shulchan Arukh* states, "One should use unused charity funds to marry off orphan girls, for there is no greater charity" (*Yoreh Deah* 249:15). The mention of "unused charity funds" indicates that the primary use of those funds is to feed the poor and take care of the immediate needs of the community. If something remains, then we can divert the funds to other charitable uses, the first of which is to supply a dowry for an orphan who has no means at all of paying for her wedding.

This raises several questions. What if a poor person has no means of marrying off his daughter? Is he entitled to some of those funds? He is, after all, poor and deserving of our assistance. On the other hand, she does have someone to look after her (see *Shakh*, 249:11). If "there is no greater charity" shouldn't this be THE primary charity? Why is a community required to establish a charity fund to support its members (see *Yoreh Deah* 256:1, that each city **MUST** establish a fund for the poor), and yet only use the funds for a different cause only if money remains in the account? If marrying off orphan girls is the priority, what follows? Orphan boys? Students? The ill? Furthermore, the Codes later state that redeeming captives is the priority (*Yoreh Deah* 252:1)! Thus, we see that there is a certain amount of flexibility in deciding how to spend our charity funds, providing we establish a set of priorities that works. This is another meaning of charity being compared to judgment.

God willing, in the weeks to come we will explore the priorities of charity, requirements of individuals versus organizational needs, the establishment of a charity fund and its intentions, the obligations of charitable gifts - by whom - along with guidelines for what constitutes a proper amount. (This seems a gargantuan task, but we'll try to simplify it.)

Meanwhile, may Hashem help us to always make the right decision and choices throughout our lives, to give charity as we should so that we can exercise "charitable judgment" - and may we be spared the ignominy of ever being in the position to need charity. After all, "it is more blessed to give than to receive."

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