

What my mother taught me about charity



Homeless man is begging on the street

The commandments regarding charity are set forth in the Torah and elucidated in the Talmud. In Tractate Baba Batra (9b), Rav Yitzhak said: “Anyone who gives a coin to a poor person receives six blessings, and whoever consoles him with words of comfort and encouragement receives eleven blessings.”

And Tractate Brachot (58b) relates how Rav Chana always kept his hand in his pocket so as not to embarrass the poor by visibly reaching in when giving alms.

For many, charity is the embodiment of Torah values and service and is thus considered innately Jewish. The humanitarian impulse was so ingrained over the generations that Jews became known for donating more than any other ethnic or religious group.

But somewhere along the line charity became conflated with

politics and giving patterns began to reflect ideologies that often diverged from normative Jewish tradition. As many Jews became secular and liberal, they began to eschew Jewish philanthropy and instead support political causes and institutions. In many households, charitable giving went to organizations advocating partisan ideals and progressive politics rather than traditional cultural and educational endeavors. Perhaps not coincidentally, support for religious institutions and Israel seemed to drop off as observance and affiliation declined.

Those who look to these trends for direction have forgotten the Jewish concept of charity or never learned it at all.

The Hebrew word for charity, “tzedakah,” derives from the word “tzedek,” which means “righteousness.” The word root implies more than simply donating to the needy – though that is certainly important – and has nothing to do with supporting political ideologies, particularly when they contravene Jewish law and tradition.

As expounded by the Rambam (Maimonides), one of the highest levels of tzedakah is to give anonymously so that neither giver nor recipient knows the other. This preserves human dignity while assisting those in need and fulfilling the Jews’ obligation to participate in G-d’s ongoing act of creation by infusing the mundane world with holiness. Dignity is paramount even when anonymity is impossible.

I reflected on this recently as my mother’s tenth yahrzeit approached...

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