

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Shlomoh *ben* Nochum *a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Charity in the Home

Referring to the proper way to treat *aniyim* (the poor) – a recurring theme in this week's *parshah* – the Mishnah in Avos states (1:5):

“Yose ben Yochanan, Man of Yerushalayim, says: ... *Aniyim* should be members of your household.”

Most commentators understand the Mishnah as an injunction to help the poor through employment. Instead of acquiring a staff of servants, one should hire a pauper. The householder will receive the twin benefits of household help and the reward for the great mitzvah he has fulfilled – providing room, board, and dignified sustenance to a fellow Jew.

The renowned Maggid of Dubno (*Ohel Ya'akov, parshas Re'eh*) offers quite an original, alternative interpretation of this directive. In so doing, he reveals certain underlying essentials of the mitzvah of *tzedakah*, which may be unfamiliar to some. Apparently, many of us have it completely backwards.

The Different Attitudes of Giving

Among those who engage in giving *tzedakah*, one of two main approaches are usually adopted. (For the purposes of this article, we will refer to them as the “rational” approach and the “universal” approach.) The proponents of either approach may both give generously and are to be commended for their charitable acts. However, there are real ramifications as an outgrowth of which attitude is taken.

The “rational” fellow sees himself as filling a need. His thinking goes something like this: *Nebuch* (‘tis a shame), there are poor people in the world who lack even basic necessities of life. Those more fortunate should step up to the plate. Instead of being stingy, one should be willing to part with at least a portion of his wealth to help the destitute and feed the hungry.

This individual may be extremely generous and have altruistic motives. He may be extremely devoted and even perceive his existence as being dedicated toward helping those less fortunate than he. However, therein lies his flaw, as we shall see: he assumes that it is *he* who is helping the poor and not vice-versa.

The “universal” giver takes a broader view and is more in tune with the Torah's outlook on the workings of Hashem's universe. It is through this prism that he conducts his charitable efforts.

How the World Operates – From the Bottom, Up

Throughout Torah literature, it is made quite clear that the continued existence of man is dependant on no small measure of Divine mercy. Would the world be governed through strict justice only, there would be little hope for imperfect man.

And so, as Hashem runs His world, He employs the unique and gracious traits known as the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy (listed in *Shemos 34:6,7*). The Ramak (R' Moshe Kordevero, a Kabalistic master of the 16th century) expounds on these attributes in his monumental work *Tomer Devorah* and speaks there of our obligation to emulate these important traits in our dealings with fellow Jews.

In the concluding section of chapter one, the Ramak stresses the benefits of following in the merciful ways of Hashem. The Attributes are reciprocal: by patterning one's behavior to emulate the Attributes of Hashem, an individual can "awaken" these identical traits in the Heavenly Abode.

In other words: people are dependent on Hashem's mercy in order to survive. When a mortal exerts himself to feel mercy toward his fellow Jews and conducts himself with patience and magnanimity toward others, the effects reach Heavenward. Hashem reciprocates in kind and a great outpouring of mercy will descend from on High. In a sense, the merciful individual is responsible for effecting and summoning a measure of much-needed mercy for himself and for the world at large.

The "universal" giver is aware of this great truth. He realizes that *he needs the aniyim more than they need him*. In fact, he recognizes that the very existence of poor people is necessary for his survival, as they provide him with continued opportunities to effect Divine mercy.

The Torah states unequivocally in this week's *parshah*: "For there will never cease to be poor people from the land," (*ibid*, v. 11). Why is that? This question was actually posed many years ago by the wicked Roman leader Turnus Rufus to R' Akiva. "If your G-d loves the poor, why does he allow them to continue to live in squalor?" (*Bava Basra 10a*). R' Akiva replied that *aniyim* are actually saviors of the Jewish people; through the poor, we are spared from Gehinom and achieve everlasting life.

This, then, is the fundamental difference between our two types of philanthropists. The "rational" giver thinks that the poor need him. The "universal" giver knows that *he himself* needs the *aniyim*.

When the Going Gets Tough

The difference in outlook translates into practical ramifications when the economic wheel turns south, and the philanthropist himself falls on hard times. If he saw his role as helper of the poor, his charitable activities may diminish considerably. Previously, he had been agreeable to share of his resources with those less fortunate. Now, he himself is no longer so "fortunate" and has his own family to take care of before he can start worrying about others.

For the *tzedakah* giver of the “universal” school, the situation is totally different. He did not see himself as doing such a “tremendous favor” for other people by doling out from his own wealth for others. Rather, he saw the poor people for what they really were: people who helped *him* and allowed *him* to survive in this world and the next. When that is the outlook, how can he stop giving, even when the going gets tough? On the contrary, he needs Divine mercy now more than ever! Now is the time to *increase* acts of mercy and kindness, not cut down!

This, concludes the Dubner Maggid, is the Mishnah’s intent: “Let the poor be like the members of your household.” The Mishnah is exhorting us to adopt just that attitude when it comes to giving *tzedakah*. In this way, our charitable practices will be a constant, even in hard times. We will not abandon or “shortchange” the *aniyim* – just as we provide for our own family members, no matter what the circumstances.