

This month's study with  
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*“If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you.”*

— Leviticus 25:35



## Tzedakah: Righteous Giving

**T**zedakah, commonly defined as the Jewish term for charity, is actually a very different concept from what we typically associate with altruistic giving. The word “charity” implies giving by people who have wealth to those who are impoverished as an act of loving-kindness. However, in the Jewish tradition, *tzedakah* is not rooted in kindness. Instead, it comes from the Hebrew word *tzedek*, meaning justice. This linguistic relationship teaches us the most fundamental concept about Jewish giving: It’s not an act of mercy; it’s an act of righteousness.

It may seem counterintuitive that charity is rooted in justice. We might think that because we have worked for our money we should decide what to do with it. If we choose to share it with others, that should be our decision. If we choose to spend it on ourselves, that should also be up to us.

However, that’s not how God designed the world. The word *tzedakah* is actually two words put together – *tzedek*, meaning “justice,” and *kah*, which is a name for God. Together these words mean “the justice of God.”

Based on this understanding, let’s take a look at what giving is really about when we bring God into the equation. The first step is to realize that everything belongs to God: *“The silver is mine and the gold is mine,” declares the LORD Almighty* (Haggai 2:8). Everything that we possess – from the wealth that we attain, to the talents and circumstances that allowed us to acquire it – are all gifts from God.

God has given us all that we have in order that we might use our resources appropriately.

While we are encouraged to enjoy God’s gifts, we are also commanded to give to the poor: *“If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them . . .”* Since all our money is really God’s to begin with, He has every right to command us to share what we have with others. In fact, according to Jewish tradition, when we give to the poor, we are merely giving them what is theirs in the first place, but entrusted to us temporarily. It is indeed an act of justice.

In this month’s *Limmud* we will explore the depth and breadth of the concept of *tzedakah* from a Jewish perspective as rooted in the Bible. We will learn how *tzedakah* is a foundational value in the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, “fixing the world.” God could have completed creation without our involvement, but He chose to leave the work of creation unfinished so that we might be His partners in creating the ideal world. The primary way through which we do that is by upholding the ideals of kindness and justice. *Tzedakah* is a way for us to put both values into action. In our study we will examine how righteous giving forms the building blocks of God’s Kingdom and brings us closer to a perfected world.

*Rabbi Eckstein*



## With a Spirit of Faith

*“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.”*

— Malachi 3:10

**I**t goes against logic that if we give something away, we will be left with more, not less. Yet God promises us exactly that when it comes to giving *tzedakah*. In Proverbs 28:27 we read: *“Those who give to the poor will lack nothing . . .”* However, not only will we not lack as a result of our giving, we also will gain.

In general, according to Jewish belief, we are not allowed to test God. We cannot say that if we pray extra hard, we expect God to give us all we pray for. We are not permitted to say that if we do a certain act of kindness than we expect extra Divine protection. Yet, there is one exception.

When it comes to the act of giving *tzedakah*, God promises to reward us financially, and He tells us, “Test me in this.” In the book of Malachi, God told the Israelites, *“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this . . . and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.”*

This is why the Jewish sages equate giving *tzedakah* with *emunah*, having faith. When we give charity, we express our

faith in two aspects. Firstly, we demonstrate our faith that God created the world and everything in it, therefore it is our duty to distribute God’s wealth appropriately. Secondly, we have faith that while we may be giving away our hard-earned money, we will not lack, but will ultimately gain.

When we give *tzedakah*, we quite literally “put our money where our mouth is.” We take the faith that is in our heart and the faith that we speak and preach about, and turn it into action. This also explains why the sages equate the giving of *tzedakah* with the fulfillment of all the commandments in the *Torah*. The act of giving takes the most fundamental concepts in the Bible – that God created the world and that God is involved in the world – and makes them real through our actions.

Moreover, God promises that there will always be poor in the land (Deuteronomy 15:11). This is because *tzedakah* is not just a physical solution to a social-economic problem; rather it is a spiritual practice, one that we will always be required to fulfill as an expression of our faith in God.

## think about it...

- 1. There are approximately seven billion people living in the world today.** Of those, about one billion are living in extreme poverty and in a state of starvation. However, studies reveal that the world is producing enough food to feed 10 billion people! How do these facts change the conversation on solving world hunger?
- 2. If every person on earth tithed their earnings, there would be enough money for everybody.** If every person tithed their time, donating 10 percent of their time to altruistic causes, we could put an end to some or all of the world’s deadliest illnesses and solve some our greatest problems. What step might you and your family take to either begin or increase a “tithe” of your resources toward helping those around you? How might we increase awareness of this potential and inspire others to participate in tithing?
- 3. The Hebrew word “to give” is *natan*, which is a**
- palindrome, meaning it reads the same way forward as it does backward.** This teaches us that giving is a two-way street — when we give, we also receive. How does that concept inspire the way you give and how much you might contribute in the future?
- 4. But for the grace of God we go.** Had God chosen so, we, too, could be impoverished and needy, completely dependent on the kindness of others. When we put ourselves in the other person’s shoes, how does that impact the way we see the needy? What kind of help would we want if we were in their shoes?
- 5. Judaism maintains that how we give is as important as how much we give.** How might we give in a way that preserves the dignity of the receiver and even provides comfort and hope?
- 6. *Tzedakah* is an act of justice and obligation both physical and spiritual.** How does this definition colour your view of giving? How might the world be different if people gave out of a sense of duty as opposed to a feeling of mercy?



## With a Willing Heart

*Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.*

— Deuteronomy 15:10

If defining *tzedakah* as an act of justice was not radical enough, the Bible provides another understanding of *tzedakah*, which turns the entire concept of charity on its head. Instead of seeing charity as an act that primarily benefits that receiver, Scripture teaches that philanthropic giving is an act that mostly benefits the giver. While many people respond to requests to give with a grudging heart, the Bible teaches that charity is actually a golden opportunity for the giver.

The Bible commands us to “*Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart.*” And when we do so, “. . . *the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.*” *Tzedakah* is an act that boomerangs back upon the giver who receives even more than he or she has given in return. Moreover, the Jewish view is that wealth and poverty are like a revolving wheel. Those who are wealthy today might become poor tomorrow.

Therefore, when we give generously and with an open heart, we ensure that should we need it one day, the same generosity will be afforded to us. The Bible emphasizes

this concept in Exodus 22:25, where we read, “*If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy . . .*” The Jewish sages comment that God specifically says “*my people among you*” because we need to see ourselves as “one of them.” We need to understand that we could just as easily be in the shoes of the pauper and give as we would want to be given to.

Ultimately, the main reason to give generously is because the poor are not strangers but our brethren. As the sages point out, every time Scripture commands us to give to the poor, the word “brother” also appears. This teaches us that we must see the needy as our own family members. Just as we would never turn our backs on our loved ones, we must never close our hearts to those who are also the children of God.

We are commanded to love our neighbour as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18). When we love each other, we help each other, and by giving *tzedakah* lovingly, we bring great pleasure to our Father in Heaven. And we also help bring God’s kingdom ever closer into our corner of the world, one generous deed at a time.

## apply it...

- 1. Make an accounting of your earnings.** According to Jewish thought, 10 percent of our earnings simply do not belong to us; they belong to God, Who intended it for the poor. Make a plan to be more purposeful and intentional about distributing 10 percent of your money to charity on a regular basis.
- 2. Activate your faith.** When we give *tzedakah*, we put our faith into action by giving away what we have, with trust that we will not lack, but even gain as a result.
- 3. Go hungry for a day.** We are called on to be empathetic when we give. Going without food for a day or sitting out in the cold can help us feel what the needy feel and make our giving more willing.
- 4. Help someone find a job.** According to Judaism, the highest form of *tzedakah* is when we help someone become self-sufficient and no longer reliant on handouts. Finding a job for person, giving someone a
- 5. Pray with a grateful heart while giving.** While most people tend to expect gratitude in return for their charity, Judaism explains that we should be grateful for the opportunity to give. Next time you give, praise God for the privilege to do so.
- 6. Honour the needy.** It’s common for people to look down upon those in need. Instead let’s do the “just” thing and give the poor what is truly theirs with the utmost respect, kindness, and love. Find a way to express and affirm their dignity as you help them.
- 7. Make a *tzedakah* box.** With your family or circle of friends, make giving an integral part of your gatherings by constructing a charity box. Whenever you are together, make it a practice to pass the charity box and collect gifts for the less fortunate. A quick internet search for “how to build a *tzedakah* box” will give you some ideas for all ages, from the simple to the ornate.





## With an Open Hand

*If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need.*

— Deuteronomy 15:7–8

In Genesis 2:3 we read that “God blessed the seventh day . . . because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.” The English translation of the Bible reads simply enough, but the original Hebrew is confusing. The last phrase literally reads: “He rested from all that He created in order to do.” “He created” is in past tense, while “in order to do” is in future tense.

The Jewish sages explain that Creation is a two-phase process. First God created the basics. With what God originated, we, as His partners, are expected to participate in creating the rest. This understanding is critical. It underscores Judaism’s essential value of *tikkun olam*, of perfecting the world. According to Judaism, it is our responsibility — and privilege — to be God’s partners in making the world a magnificent place.

This concept defines the Jewish perspective on giving. When we are charitable, we are not doing someone else a favour. Rather, we are fulfilling our God-given duty and responsibility to distribute God’s resources. In Proverbs 22:22 (NKJV) we read: “Do not rob the poor . . .” How can someone rob the poor? Poor people don’t have anything to

be taken from them.

The sages explain that when we withhold charity, we are robbing the poor of what truly belongs to them. God has entrusted us with what is essentially theirs. It is our duty to distribute it. If we fail to fulfill our obligation, it is as if we have stolen from those who are most needy.

This perspective also explains an otherwise difficult-to-understand verse in Psalm 145:16 where we read: “You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” We read this knowing that there are millions of people around the world who are starving. The truth is that God opens his hand and there is plenty for everyone, but it is our responsibility to take what God has given us and open our hands to others. Then all will be satisfied.

The emphasis on our duty to give as an act of moral justice shifts the paradigm of philanthropy entirely. In this system, there are only givers. Even the poor must give. We do away with the notion of being a victim and focus entirely on the concept of becoming a provider. This ensures that the poor are cared for while dignity is preserved.





# Laws and Customs Observed Today



*Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year.*

— Deuteronomy 14:22

**T**he main law that guides *tzedakah* is the biblical directive to contribute 10 percent of our earnings to charitable purposes. This law is derived from Scriptures that states: “*Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year.*”

While this commandment was written in agricultural terms, it has general significance: we are required to give away 10 percent of our earnings. This is the source of what has become known in Christian and Jewish traditions as “tithing.” We give away a tenth of what we have.

Judaism’s oral tradition explains that the average person must give away at least 10 percent, but not more than 20 percent so that the person should not come to neglect his or her own needs. However, the Jewish sages also recognize that while the poor are required to tithe what they have like everyone else, if a person is so impoverished that their basic needs are barely met, the 10 percent mandate is suspended. In addition, a person with unusual wealth may give away far more than 20 percent. Moreover, when we give charity as part of repentance or as part of a prayer to God, we may make an exception and give more than the suggested amount.

Another important idea that directs our giving is the old adage that charity begins at home. This means that a person is expected to provide for his or her family members before strangers. After family, we work out in concentric circles, taking care first of the poor of our community, then our city, then our country, and then the world. The exception is the poor of Israel, which is seen as the poor of our community even when we live outside of Israel, and consequently, this is placed as a higher priority in our giving.

In addition, Judaism recognizes that all giving is not the same. In fact, the sages list eight types of giving, from the least ideal to the most meritorious. The levels range from the lowest level, which is giving begrudgingly, to the highest level, which is enabling the poor to become self-reliant by giving them a job or some other means of supporting themselves.

Customs surrounding *tzedakah* include giving when taking on a spiritual pursuit like combating anger or having more faith, and giving before lighting Sabbath candles or performing other biblical commandments. It is common to give charity as an accompaniment to prayer so that a person may be healed, find a marriage partner, find a job, and so forth.

*Tzedakah* is also given as a form of repentance and is particularly emphasized during the High Holy Days of *Rosh Hashannah* and *Yom Kippur*. Finally, *tzedakah* is often made part of a daily spiritual practice. Whether we give a little or a lot, the goal is that we become givers at our core.

## The Little Box that Makes a Big Difference

A staple of Jewish giving is the *pushka*, Yiddish for “little box,” also known as a *tzedakah* box. These small containers can be as simple as a tin can or as elaborate as a silver-engraved receptacle. They are a staple in Jewish homes, but can also be found in Jewish establishments, such as kosher supermarkets, book stores, day school classrooms, and other Jewish gathering places or businesses. These containers are meant for depositing spare change and dollars. However, the point is not to save and keep the money, but to give it away as charity.

The idea behind the *pushka* is simple: a little is a lot. With the centrality of the *tzedakah* box, it is easy to give charity, and it then becomes a frequent, if not daily, practice. The small deposits ultimately add up to large sums. Whether we give away a large sum at one time or a small sum each day, we have participated in the act of giving. And in doing so, we transform our very essence and become givers at our core.