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The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor

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9. “God Stands Together with the Poor”

How Jews Viewed Poverty and Aided the Poor in the Post-Biblical Period

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Introduction

Much of the material in this article comes from classical Jewish sources of the first four or five centuries of the Common Era. Other sources that I cite derive from later attempts to reconcile and distill the collected opinions of the sages and rabbis of this earlier period. Within Judaism it is characteristic that the tradition preserves minority as well as majority opinions, so that on some issues practices differ depending on which authorities are given precedence.

For this article, I was determined to let the material dictate the manner of its presentation. Thus, after reading through a number of primary documents and secondary discussions, seven issues or questions presented themselves as being of special importance within the sphere of Jewish belief and practice. By no means are these the only questions that could be raised, nor do they, individually or collectively, reflect all of the issues that are

relevant to a full discussion of our topic. Nonetheless, in my view, these seven questions and their varying responses provide readers with a textured picture of the range of analysis that characterizes Jews and Judaism within the framework of this Symposium's primary emphases.

I have attempted to provide biblical citations whenever they appear in the sources or can be easily derived from the sources. This is also in keeping with the major theme of this Symposium. Within Judaism the road from biblical passage to practical application is not always smooth or obvious. In fact, it is not difficult for me to imagine that, on more than one occasion, the rabbis determined the rule before locating a biblical passage on which to base it – that is, they eisegeted rather than exegeted.

This is not to cast doubt on the authenticity or applicability of the rabbinic process; rather, it points to the fact that the rabbis cast one eye on their contemporary community while the other focused on the biblical text. Moreover, Jewish interpreters of Sacred Writ were never “burdened” by the need to stay within the often restrictive boundaries set by a “literal” reading of the text.

The ordering of these seven questions is not necessarily intended to reflect their comparative importance. Rather, they seem (or at least seemed to me) to flow naturally from one question to the next. Since within traditional Judaism there is a certain resistance to declaring any particular enumeration as authoritative, I do not impute any special significance to this order or, as noted above, even to this listing of topics. Nonetheless, if it provides sustenance to the interested and food for further reflection to the inquisitive, I will be reasonably satisfied.

Charity: A Command or an Impulse?

Story: Once it happened that Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai had a dream in which he saw that his sister's sons would lose seven hundred dinars. He asked them to give him this amount for charity. They secretly retained seventeen dinars. On the eve of Yom Kippur officials came and seized the seventeen dinars. Rabban Johanan said to them, “Do not be upset, you kept seventeen dinars and it was that sum that was taken from you.” They asked, “how did you know?” he replied, “I saw it all in my dream.” Whereupon they asked, “Why did you not tell us and we would have given you the entire amount for charity?” “Because,” he answered, “I wanted you to give to charity for its own sake” (Nadich: 265).

There are four laws of Purim funds designated for the poor. The first is especially relevant to this topic: “Every man is duty bound to give at least two gifts, to two poor people” (Marcus: 200-201, citing the *Shulchan Aruk*, which was prepared by Joseph Caro and first published in Venice in 1564-1565; it contains a distinctive and popular distillation of Jewish law).

In his “Gifts to the Poor” (7:10) Maimonides writes:

Someone who does not want to give *tzedakah* or who gives less than what is proper for him, the Beit din compels him and beats him (with what are

called) “beatings of rebellion” until he gives what they estimated for him to give. And they may appropriate his possessions without his consent and take from him what is proper for him to give. And they may seize possessions in pledge for *tzedakah* (which is owed) even on Sabbath eves (cited in Shapiro: 695).

The above text from Maimonides explicitly brings out the character of *tzedakah* as an absolute duty. For individuals, membership in a people or community implies certain obligations toward the whole. Contributing a portion of one’s wealth to the poor is a primary way of recognizing the ethical relation between “parts” and “wholes.” In truth, what comes across in this source is an important qualification or limitation of private, individual ownership. With respect to those who fail to fulfill their communal financial duties, the Court intervenes on behalf of the Torah’s command to support the poor. Within the Jewish community as envisioned by Maimonides, *tzedakah* is virtually a tax imposed on one’s possessions. As such, it carries the same legal consequences for non-payment that were enacted against those who neglected to pay what they owed secular princes or governments (Shapiro: 696).

The word *tzedakah* comes from a Hebrew root meaning justice or righteousness; it is with this general meaning that biblical writers use the term. Fundamentally, it is a duty, the designated distribution of a part of one’s wealth or possessions to others. This duty was imposed on both the individual and communal levels. The ways of *tzedakah* are the “positive,” active element in the Jewish effort to establish a holy relation between people and money. As always, the forces of the material realm need guidance from the spiritual. These Jewish laws may address or correct certain features of our commercial, capitalist societies without negating the free operation of economic markets (Shapiro: 682).

To aid the poor is to “re-humanize” children of God. It is to restore rights that have been denied. The elimination of poverty is not an option, a voluntary decision benevolently made by an individual and a society. In our day, charity is presumed to come from the goodness of the heart. In the Jewish concept of *tzedakah*, the heart plays an indispensable role. But assistance to the poor is more than love. *Tzedakah* is not an act of condescension from one person to another who is in a lower social and economic status. It is the fulfillment of an obligation to a fellow being with equal status before God. It is an act of justice to which the recipient is entitled by right, the virtue of being human.

Because God is a God of justice, the beings created in His image must treat each other with justice. Injustice to man is desecration of God. “Whoso mocks the poor blasphemes his Maker” (Proverbs 17:5). On the other hand, “He that is gracious unto the poor lends unto our Lord” (Proverbs 19:17). Jewish tradition went so far as to state that “the poor man does more for the rich man than the rich man for the poor man” (Ruth Rabba 5:9, also 19). The poor give the righteous an opportunity to perform good deeds, to sanctify the name of God (Leviticus Rabba 34). Refusal to give charity is considered by Jewish tradition to be idolatry.

In the view of Richard G. Hirsch, only the concept of obligatory justice would have impelled Isaiah to thunder his criticism against the leaders of his time:

It is you that have eaten up the vineyard;
The spoiled of the poor is in your houses;
What men that you crush My people,
And grind the face of the poor?
Says the Lord, the God of Hosts (Isaiah 3:14, 15).

Throughout the Bible, injustice is constantly identified as failure to relieve the plight of the poor:

Wash you, make clean,
Put away the evil of your doings
From before My eyes,
Cease to do evil;
Learn to do well;
Seek justice, relieve the oppressed,
Judge the fatherless, plead for the widow (Isaiah 1:16, 17).

Cursed be he that perverts the justice due to the stranger, fatherless and widow (Deuteronomy 27:19).

Another frequently used Hebrew term for charity is *mitzvah*, which literally means “a divine commandment.” Alleviating poverty is a duty, stemming not alone from a man’s inner sense of love and justice. It is an obligation ordained by God. To fulfill a “divine commandment” is not to watch another struggle through the game of life, but to be an active participant, to take initiative, to seek out those who require assistance, even if they do not request it. In this sense, *tzedakah* entails “running after the poor” (Hirsch: 238-40).

Priority on Donor or Recipient?

Story: The Talmud recounts the lengths to which great scholars went in order to protect the self-respect of the poor. A rabbi and his wife, accustomed to giving alms while recipients were asleep, were surprised when one poor man awoke. In order not to offend him, they jumped into a still heated oven, risking serious burns (*Ketuvot* 67b). Another rabbi would tie money in a scarf and when he was near a poor man, would fling the gift over his back, so that the poor man would not have to suffer embarrassment of facing his benefactor (*Baba Batra* 10b) (Hirsch: 241).

Story: A man who is down on his luck tells his sad story to two passersby. One is moved to tears, embraces him, and gives him five dollars because that is all he can afford. The second man interrupts him halfway through and gives him fifty dollars just to shut him up. Who has done a better thing? The younger people, all of whom have been raised to believe that feelings are more important than deeds, regularly choose the first person because his heart was in his gift. According to others, however, by Jewish law, the second man was the better because fifty dollars will help the beggar ten times as much as the five dollars will, and the purpose of *tzedaka* is to help the poor, not to give us opportunities to feel virtuous (see Kushner: 67, for this story attributed to Dennis Praeger).

On this topic, prolific author Harold Kushner speculates on what he perceives as a “philosophical difference” between Judaism, which places greater emphasis on the recipient of *tzedakah*, and Christianity, in which he perceives more focused attention on charitable givers and their motivations. He finds specific biblical texts to buttress his case:

In that famous passage in the Gospels (Matthew 26:6-13) in which a woman pours expensive oil on Jesus’ head and the disciples scold her, saying she could have sold the oil and given the money to the poor, Jesus supports the woman, saying, “You will always have the poor with you” – that is, what you don’t do for the poor today, you will be able to do for them tomorrow or next week – “but you will not always have me.” The words “the poor you will always have with you” come from the Torah, in the Book of Deuteronomy [15:11], but there they have the exact opposite meaning. “For the poor shall never cease out of the land; therefore I command you to open your hand to your poor and needy brother.” In other words, because there will always be poor people, society has to find a way of sustaining them without making them depend on your having some money left over after your shopping and vacation (66).

Kushner’s viewpoint, while supported in some traditional Jewish texts, is by no means the only acceptable or accepted option. There are other sources that appear to emphasize the role of the giver. Among them, we can cite:

Do not give in a condescending, insulting manner; those who do will have no share in the World to Come.

Give of the best, not from leftovers (Jacobs: 15).

Pirke Avot, an influential mishnaic text, enumerates four types who give charity:

One wants to give, but does not want others to give –

A bad eye on others’ possessions.

One does not want to give, but wants others to give –

A bad eye on his own possessions.

One wants to give,

And wants others to give – saintly

One does not want to give,

And does not want others to give – wicked (Berkson: 166-67, citing *Pirke Avot* 5:16)

In an oft-cited portion of his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides gives primary emphasis to the giver, but does not ignore the feelings or the plight of the recipient:

Anyone who gives *tzedakah* to a poor person in a surly manner and with a gloomy face completely nullifies the merit of his own deed, even if he gives him a thousand gold pieces. He should rather give him cheerfully and gladly, while sympathizing with him who is in trouble, as it is written: “Did I not weep for him whose day was hard? Was not my soul grieved for the poor?”

(Job 30:25). He should speak to him graciously and comfortingly, as it written: “I gladdened the heart of the widow” (Job 29:13).

He who urges and activates others to give *tzedakah* receives a greater reward than the donor himself, as it is written: “The effect of righteousness will be peace” (Isaiah 32:17). With regard to the collectors of *tzedakah* and the like, Scripture says: “Those who turn many to righteousness shall be like the stars” (Daniel 12:3).

There are eight degrees, each one higher than the other. The highest degree is to aid a Jew in want by offering him a gift or a loan, by entering into partnership with him, or by providing work for him, so that he may become self-supporting, without having to ask people for anything. In regard to this it is written: “You shall maintain him; whether stranger or sojourner, he shall live beside you” (Leviticus 25:35); that is to say, maintain him so that he may not fall and be in need of help. . . The eighth degree is when he gives him painfully, grudgingly (Birnbaum: 158-59, citing *Mishneh Torah: Seeds* 10:4-14).

It is worth observing that the eighth degree of *tzedakah* – admittedly, the lowest, but still deserving of the term – stands in tension with the observation by Maimonides and others that essentially it would be better (for both giver and recipient) to give nothing than to give grudgingly or in a condescending manner. This is, in my view, among the many tensions in traditional Jewish practice that remain unresolved, allowing for both personal and communal flexibility.

This tension is in no way limited to abstraction or theorizing. In the very real world of Jewish fundraising, contemporary and earlier, thorny issues have arisen when, for example, a large donor has been found guilty of financial fraud or similar malfeasance. Does this necessitate the return of “tainted” money, the refusal to accept any other funding from this individual, or possibly even removing the family’s name from a structure built in its honor? Or does the fact that these funds are doing a lot of good for a large number of people suggest that community-service organizers ought to cast their eyes, and their priorities, on the recipients without overly concerning themselves with the sources or methods of the donor’s beneficence? The record shows that organizations have taken both of these approaches or on occasion have devised some middle-road alternatives.

Maimonides once more returns to this theme in his “Gifts to the Poor” (10:5), where he also enlarges our understanding of *tzedakah* to encompass encouraging words in addition to (or in place of) material help:

If the poor man asks you (for help) but you have nothing to give him, console him with words. And it is forbidden to rebuke a poor man or to raise one’s voice at him in a scream, because his heart is broke and depressed, for it says, “a broken and depressed heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalms 51:16). And it says, “To revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the depressed” (Isaiah 57:15). And woe to the one who shames the poor, woe to him! Rather, one should act toward him as a father, both in terms of

compassion and in terms of words, as it is stated, “I am a father to the impoverished” (Job 29:16) (cited in Shapiro: 700).

What about the Undeserving Seeker of *Tzedakah*?

Story: Steven Reikes, a prominent member of the Omaha, NE Jewish community, tells this story about his zeide (grandfather). Every Jewish person who sought support seemed to end up at the Reikes home. And zeide Reikes invariably said “yes” to every request. Once, a seemingly poor man arrived while a cousin of zeide Reikes was also there. As was his wont, zeide Reikes gave some money, and the man went off. When the cousin objected that this man really did not seem deserving of *tzedakah*, zeide Reikes responded: Maybe he will throw the money up and use wisely what stuck to the ceiling. Or maybe he will waste all of the money. Better to give to many undeserving people than to withhold *tzedakah* from even one deserving individual.

Earlier we looked at one of the four laws of Purim funds designated for the poor. Another of them is particularly relevant to the present topic:

We need not investigate in giving any Purim money, but may bestow it upon any one who reaches out his hands to receive it. In places where it is the custom to give Purim money to non-Jews also, it is all right to follow the custom (Marcus: 200-201).

At the same time, it is likely on Purim (as on any other occasion) that not every person who requests help is deserving of it. May we investigate the condition of those who request funds, so that only those truly deserving will receive them? The rabbis of the Talmud discussed this issue and came up with opposing views (*Bava Batra* 9a). Rabbi Huna maintained that one should check the condition of a poor person who requests food, but Rabbi Judah said one should check up only on the poor person who requests clothing. The *halakhab* (law) was determined to follow Rabbi Judah. Maimonides ruled likewise: “If a poor person whom one does not know says, ‘I am hungry, feed me,’ one must not investigate whether or not he is being honest but must provide for him immediately. If he has no clothes and says, ‘provide me clothing,’ then one investigates whether or not he is being honest” (“Gifts to the Poor” 7:6, cited in Hellinger).

It could not have been easy to implement this ruling by Maimonides. In like manner, the Talmud pictures Jewish leaders after Rabbi Judah as regularly disregarding his seemingly authoritative stance. Thus, we read that the *amoraim* (Jewish scholars of the third to sixth century CE) did not perform such checks in actual practice. Quite the contrary, they generally said, “Let us give the cheaters the benefit of the doubt, for were it not for them we might be sinning every day” (*Ketubbot* 67b, 68a). The attitude of the Sages was that it is a *mitzvah* to give *tzedakah* and help one’s fellow whenever requested and that whoever does not give to a poor person is considered a sinner. Hence, if some people who ask are charlatans, they “save” from sin those who are able to give and do not give, or those who give belatedly. The potential giver is saved from sinning by virtue of those who pose as poor.

It appears that the *tannaim* (Jewish scholars who lived in the first two centuries CE) as well considered that a person who gives *tzedakah* ought not to check out the poor person who asks. Therefore the Mishnah inserted a warning to deter charlatans from asking for

charity: “And anyone who is not in need of taking and does take will not die before he will be dependent on others; and he who is not lame or blind or limping and pretends to be as one of these will not die of old age before he becomes like one of them, as it is said, ‘Justice, justice shall you pursue’ (Deut. 16:20) (*Pe’ab* 8.9)” (Hellinger).

It has been my observation, admittedly more anecdotal than analytical, that Jews, as individuals and as communities, typically err on the side of being overly generous (if I may use my experience). Whether or not any potential charlatans are deterred by the dire consequences the rabbis envision for cheaters, I have witnessed or heard of very few “means tests” for those seeking support from Jewish communities. Admittedly, this policy does open the door, partially or widely, to connivance and deceit. But, overall, the Reikes family policy has traditionally predominated.

What is Needed to Restore a Person (Through Charity) to His/Her Previous Status?

Story: Hillel was a humble man. He used to say, “My humiliation is my exaltation: my exaltation is my humiliation.”

There was a man of a wealthy family who had become poor. Hillel provided him with a horse to ride upon and with a servant to run before him. One day he could not find a servant, so he himself ran before him for three miles (Nadich: 205).

Story: One Babylonian rabbi sent his son to give a contribution to a poor man on the eve of Yom Kippur. The boy returned to his father and complained that the poor man was not in need since the boy had seen him imbibing precious old wine. Over the protests of his son, the rabbi doubled his normal contribution, on the grounds that the gentleman had been used to a better life than the rabbi had originally thought (Hirsch: 242).

Deuteronomy 15:7-8 presents in some detail, although also with some ambiguity, a rather expansive view of fulfilling the needs of an impoverished individual:

If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of our settlements in the land that the Lord our God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you should open your hand, willingly lending him enough for his needs, whatever they may be.

The expression “needy person” (*ebyon*), or synonyms such as poor, destitute, and impoverished, recur in these and in other verses in the Bible to describe the situation of people in weak economic and social circumstances. The term “needy person” does not define the precise level of economic hardship that entitles such a person to *tzedakah*; rather, it is a very general and perhaps even subjective description directed at the perception of the giver. The Torah here commands the person of means to open his hand and give the needy person sufficient for what he lacks, even adding a warning against being stingy.

What this would seem to mean is that if the “needy person” has a house, food, and clothing, but lacks accustomed luxuries or pleasures, such as “a horse on which to ride, or a

servant to go running before him,” his well-to-do brother has to supply him these needs. Indeed, the Tannaitic Midrash on these verses says just that:

“Whatever he needs” – even a horse, or a servant. . . The needy person . . . who lacked nothing but luxury items, received these things as charity from Hillel the Elder, who understood the Torah as commanding us to give the destitute enough so as to restore him to his previous socio-economic position. Therefore one was commanded to give a poor aristocrat who had been accustomed to having a horse and a servant, “whatever he lacks,” e.g., a horse to ride and a servant to wait on him (Hellinger).

Again, it was left to Maimonides (“Gifts to the Poor” 7:1, 3, 5) to codify (or at least, attempt to codify) Jewish thinking and practice on this issue:

It is a positive (Biblical) commandment to give *tzedakah* to the poor according to what is proper for the poor man, if the giver has the means (to do so), as it is stated, “you must open your hand to him” (Deut. 15:8). And it is stated, “You shall uphold him, both stranger and resident, that he may live with you” (Lev. 25:35). And it is stated, “Your brother shall live with you” (Lev. 25:36).

According to what the poor man is lacking you are commanded to give to him. If he has no clothing, they clothe him. If he has no furniture, they buy it for him. If he had no wife, they arrange for his marriage. And if it is a woman (in need), they arrange for her marriage to a man. Even if the way of a certain poor man had been to ride a horse while a servant runs before him and he became poor and lost his possessions, they buy him a horse to ride on and a servant to run before him, as it is stated, “Enough for his lack which he is lacking” (Deut. 15:8) (cited in Shapiro: 684).

So far as I can discern, questions relating to the restoration of individuals to their previous status do not occupy a central or strategic role in determining how Jewish individuals or organizations allot their resources. I know of no contemporary discussion that argues in favor of elevating to their previous penthouses multi-millionaires who have fallen on bad times.

Nonetheless, as we have observed in other portions of this paper, showing respect for those in need and allowing such people to retain (more than simply a shred of) their dignity are among the central concerns of *tzedakah*. In certain cases, then, it might be advisable to help make up in respect, if not through financial donations, the status once revered members of the community had previously occupied.

Is a Community Responsible for Charity?

Story: Judaism’s great emphasis on communal sharing is illustrated in the following Chassidic tale:

The story is told of a great rabbi who is given the privilege of seeing the realms of Heaven and Hell before his death. He was taken first to Hell, where he was confronted with a huge banquet room in the middle of which

was a large elegant table . . . covered from one end to the other with the most delicious food that the eyes have ever seen or the mouth tasted. And all around the table people were sitting looking at the food – and wailing. It was such a wail that the rabbi had never heard such a sad sound in his entire life and he asked, “With a luxurious table and the most delicious food, why do these people wail so bitterly?” As he entered the room, he saw the reason for their distress. For although each was confronted with this incredible sight before him, no one was able to eat the food. Each person’s arms were splinted so that the elbows could not bend. They could touch the food but could not eat it. The anguish this caused was the reason for the great wail and despair that the rabbi saw and heard.

He was next shown Heaven, and to his surprise he was confronted by the identical scene witnessed in Hell: the large banquet room, elegant, lavish setting, and sumptuous foods. And, in addition, once again everyone’s arms were splinted so the elbows could not bend. Here, however, there was no wailing, but rather joy greater than he had ever experienced in his life. For whereas here too the people could not put the food into their own mouths, each picked up the food and fed it to another. They were thus able to enjoy not only the beautiful scene, the wonderful smells, and the delicious foods, but also the joy of sharing and helping one another (Schwartz).

Story: The Inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah and the three other cities of the plain were sinful and godless:

The cause of their cruelty was their exceeding great wealth. Their soil was gold, and in their miserliness and their greed for more and more gold, they wanted to prevent strangers from enjoying aught of their riches. Accordingly, they flooded the highways with streams of water, so that the roads to their city were obliterated, and none could find their way thither. They were as heartless toward beasts as toward men. They begrudged the birds what they ate and therefore extirpated them. They behaved impiously toward one another, too, and not shrinking back from murder to gain possession of more gold. If they observed that a man owned great riches, two of them would conspire against him. They would beguile him to the vicinity of ruins, and while the one kept him on the spot by pleasant conversation, the other would undermine the wall near which he stood, until it suddenly crashed down upon him and killed him. Then the two plotters would divide his wealth between them.

The cruelty of the Sodomites went still further. Lot had a daughter, Paltit, so named because she had been born to him shortly after he escaped captivity through the help of Abraham. Paltit lived in Sodom, where she had married. Once a beggar came to town, and the court issued a proclamation that none should give him anything to eat, in order that he might die of starvation. But Paltit had pity upon the unfortunate wretch, and every day when she went to the well to draw water, she supplied him with a piece of bread, which she hid

in her water pitcher. The inhabitants of the two sinful cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, could not understand why the beggar did not perish, and they suspected that someone was giving him food in secret. Three men concealed themselves near the beggar and caught Paltit in the act of giving him something to eat. She had to pay for her humanity with death; she was burnt upon a pyre (Ginzberg: 114-15).

All of this is in keeping with the predominant rabbinic understanding that the primary sins of the people of Sodom lay in their inhospitable treatment of strangers and the inequitable structures that held up their society internally. In the ancient world, refusal to welcome strangers was deemed tantamount to impiety. From this perspective, it would not have been surprising that the cruelty and deceit characteristic of the Sodomites with respect to outsiders would be replicated through the individual and communal persecution of poorer residents of Sodom itself by their more powerful and wealthy neighbors.

Reflecting on the examples of Sodom and kindred societies, some of the sages viewed a charitable attitude between people and a ready willingness to give charity as qualities that marked the difference between a good society and a bad one (Berkson: 166-267).

So it was that Maimonides (“Gifts to the Poor” 9:1-3) made these observations:

Every town that has (members of) Israel in it, they are obligated to establish from among them *tzedakah* officials, well-known and trustworthy men who will make rounds throughout the people each and every Sabbath eve and take from everyone what he should properly give and that which has been assigned for him. And they (the officials) distribute the coins each and every Sabbath eve and give to every poor man provisions of food to last for seven days. And this (institution) is what is called Kuppah (“Basket”).

Never have we seen or heard that a community of Israel does not have a *tzedaka* Basket; however, (when it comes to) a Plate there are places that made use of one and there are places that did not make use of one. But today the common practice is that there are Basket officials making round each day and distributing (the collection) each day and distributing (the collection) each and every Sabbath eve (cited in Shapiro: 689-90).

In Talmudic times every Jewish community had provisions for poor relief. This relief was given to residents of the community, but also to those simply passing through. This was also the case (or at least, was supposed to be the case) in later times. Thus, we have this account (“The Pillar of *Tzedekah* in Poland”) from the seventeenth century:

There was no limit to the practice of charity in the land of Poland. First, as to the sheltering of strangers, if a scholar or preacher, a guest, should happen to come even to a community where they issue meal and lodging tickets for strangers, he would not have to degrade himself by accepting a ticket but could go to some officer of the community and stay wherever he liked. The system of ticket-relief did away with the humiliation of begging. But a scholar was spared even the need for tickets. Then the beadle of the community would come to get his credentials and show them to the treasurer or to the

executive officer in charge that month. They then would give him a gift – whatever they thought proper – and would respectfully send it to him through the beadle, and he would then lodge with some citizen as long as he wished.

With other wayfarers who received tickets it was thus: they would be given a note and could lodge with a householder – whose turn it now was – as many days as they wished. At the very least, every order was good for three days. They would give them eat and drink, evening, morning, and afternoon, and when they were about to continue on their way they would provide them with food for the journey and send them on from town to town by horse and wagon.

If young students or lads or householders or girls came from other towns or distant lands, they would at once clothe them. He who wanted to learn a trade would be turned over to a master-workman and he who wanted to do domestic service would be given housework to do. A large proportion of the Polish craftsmen were Jews. If a person wanted to study, they would hire a teacher to instruct him, and afterwards, when he had become a worthwhile student, some rich man would take him into his home, give him his daughter to wife along with many thousands of gold pieces as a dowry, and would dress him royally (Marcus: 206-207, citing a mid-seventeenth century contemporary account, originally in Hebrew, by Nathan Hannover; as Marcus observes, this account is not without a measure of exaggeration).

Surely, as Marcus briefly notes, accounts like those of Maimonides and the seventeenth century traveler to Poland contain hyperbolic language and idealized images of Jewish communities. Nonetheless, we ought not thereby to discount the reality of the message: Jewish communities should aspire to make resources available to those in need, whether residents, visitors, or – from today’s perspective – those in need (Jews and non-Jews) who live elsewhere.

For an account of a fully functioning Jewish community, we need look no further than Omaha, Nebraska. Funds are raised from individuals through communitywide solicitations of the Jewish Federation, synagogues, and social service agencies. Individuals are, of course, free to make their own donations, and many families establish foundations, large and small, for this purpose. In this regard, it is instructive to note that such family foundations are typically managed through another community resource, the Jewish Foundation of Omaha. The determination of the recipients of these combined funds is made by boards drawn from all relevant sectors of the community itself.

Is There Something (Inherently or Possibly) Ennobling about Being Poor?

Story: Every Sabbath eve the wife of Rabbi Hanina would make a fire of twigs in her oven (even though there was no food) so that she would not be embarrassed by her neighbors (seeing no smoke). But she had one unkind neighbor who thought to herself, “Let me see, I know they have nothing. I shall go and look.” She went and knocked on their door. Hanina’s wife,

embarrassed, went to her bedroom. A miracle occurred, for her oven suddenly became full of bread and her kneading basin full of dough. The neighbor cried out to her, "Woman, woman, bring your bread shovel or your bread will burn!" Rabbi Hanina's wife replied, "I have just gone to fetch it," because she was accustomed to having miracles occur to her (Nadich: 256).

No one should give away more than twenty percent (one fifth) of her/his wealth, lest this lead to the person's own impoverishment and subsequent need for assistance (Jacobs: 14).

While the rabbis warned the charlatan not to take charity in violation of the law, they also promised wealth and blessing to those who refrained from taking charity even though they were in hard times and entitled by the laws of Torah to take, as is written: "and anyone who is in need of taking and does not take will not die of old age before he will support others from his own, and of him the verse says, 'Blessed is he who trusts in the Lord, and the Lord shall be his trust' (Jeremiah 17:7)" (cited in Hellinger). Rabbi Akiva cogently expressed this idea in his paternal advice to his son, Rabbi Joshua: "Make your Sabbath plain and do not rely on others" (cited in Hellinger). If your financial situation does not enable you to celebrate the Sabbath properly with food and drink and clean clothes, do not take charity although you are eligible, even if your Sabbath might consequently look like a plain weekday.

The following words by Maimonides, phrased so as to leave no doubts as to his position, speak for themselves:

A person should always tighten the belt and suffer, rather than rely on others and be a burden on the community. Thus the Sages commanded, "Make your Sabbath plain and do not rely on others." Even if a person were wise and respectable and became poor, he should pursue a craft, even the lowliest, and not rely on others. Better to skin dead animals than to say to the people, "I am a great man, a wise man, I am a priest; support me." Thus the Sages were commanded. The greatest of the Sages were hewers of wood, bearers of beams and drawers of water to gardens, or iron and coal workers, and they did not ask of the community nor did they receive from them when offered ("Gifts to the Poor" 10:18) (Hellinger).

As noted above, the highest form of charity is to help others so that they are saved from becoming poor (Jacobs: 15-16).

The poor man, who is as much the child of God as the rich man, has been disinherited from his Father's wealth. He has been deprived of his patrimony, of his share of the earth's bounty. Unlike some religions, Judaism does not encourage the ascetic life. Poverty is not the way to piety. Scarcity does not lead to sanctity. The search for holiness is not made easier by insufficiency of basic necessities. Without the necessary material goods of life, man cannot attain the personal growth and satisfaction essential to human fulfillment. "All the days of the poor are evil" (Proverbs 15:15).

In my view, Hirsch is particularly effective in conveying Judaism's understanding of poverty and its effects on individuals and the community:

The common saying “Poverty is no disgrace” may offer consolation – to those who are well off. As a statement of morality, an ethical imperative, it would have much to commend it – “Poverty *should* be no disgrace.” As a statement of fact, however, it is totally inaccurate. Poverty *is* a disgrace – for those who are poor. Poverty is destructive to the human personality. “The ruin of the poor is their poverty” (Proverbs 10:15).

Humiliation leads to dehumanization. The poor man is not a complete man. “even his life is not a life,” said one teacher (Betzah 32). The afflictions of poverty are so severe that Jewish tradition makes the seemingly radical statement that “the poor man is considered a dead man” (Nedarim 64b). Poverty is spiritual death.

The poor are different. The world asks, “Why are their values not like ours? Why are they so dirty or so sullen or so promiscuous or so indolent or so passive or so uncouth or so uneducated or so unambitious? Why are they not like the rest of us?” The Bible accurately states the consequences of difference: “All the brethren of the poor do hate him; how much more do his friends go far from him” (Proverbs 19:7).

Why are the poor different? Because they are poor. Because material circumstances shape human values Judaism has never drawn a dichotomy between body and soul as other religions and systems of thought have done. . . . Poverty does not inevitably lead to ruination, just as wealth does not inevitably lead to well-being. But for the most part, the poor man in an affluent society lives in another world. Psychologically, it is a world of humiliation, a world that fails to see that a man cannot pull himself up by his own bootstraps if he has no boots and no straps. The world that callously calls upon the poor to disregard material circumstances asks a man to be more than a man and makes him feel less than a man (236-38).

As Hirsch alludes to, there are marked differences among religious traditions as to whether poverty – perhaps, voluntary poverty on a temporary (or even permanent) basis – is ennobling. As the passages cited in this section make clear, traditional Judaism sees nothing but sorrow, judged both financially and spiritually, in poverty. Physical, fiscal, and spiritual poverty are closely correlated in Jewish thinking, bound together as are the body and the soul.

The closest practice to the voluntary assumption of poverty that I can think of is the Nazirite vow outlined in the Hebrew Bible. Not only do we know of the continuance of the practice into New Testament times, but it still remains a viable alternative in some traditional Jewish communities to this day. Nonetheless, even though the Nazirite vow imposes some restrictions on the vower, it does not impose what we would understand as the necessity of following a physically or fiscally impoverished life style.

How is Abraham an Exemplary Figure?

Our ancient commentators taught that Abraham was more righteous than Job. According to rabbinical tradition, when great suffering befell Job, he attempted to justify

himself by saying, “Lord of the world, have I not fed the hungry and clothed the naked?” God conceded that Job had done much for the poor, but he had always waited until the poor came to him, whereas Abraham had gone out of his way to search out the poor. He not only brought them into his home and gave them better treatment than that to which they were accustomed, but he set up inns on the highway so that the poor and the wayfarer would have access to food and drink in time of need (Hirsch: 240).

Story: Being of the truly pious, “who promise little, but perform much,” Abraham said only: “I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your heart, seeing that ye chanced to pass my tent at dinner time. Then, after ye have given thanks to God, ye may pass it on.” But when the meal was served to the guest, it was a royal banquet, exceeding Solomon’s at the time of his most splendid magnificence. Abraham himself ran unto the herd, to fetch cattle for meat. He slaughtered three calves, that he might be able to set a “tongue with mustard” before each of his guests. In order to accustom Ishmael to God-pleasing deeds, he had him dress the calves, and he bade Sarah to bake the bread. But as he knew that women are apt to treat guests niggardly, he was explicit in his request to her. He said, “Make ready quickly three measures of meal, yea, fine meal.” As it happened, the bread was not brought to the table, because it had accidentally become unclean, and our father Abraham was accustomed to eat his daily bread only in a clean state. Abraham himself served his guests, and it appeared to him that the three men ate. But this was an illusion. In reality the angels did not eat, only Abraham, his three friends, Aner, Eshchol, and Mamre, and his son Ishmael partook of the banquet, and the portions set before the angels were devoured by a heavenly fire (Ginzberg: 111).

In Jewish tradition, then, Abraham is the biblical character who most fully embodies and expresses *tzedakah*. Building on the biblical account of Abraham’s actions, commentators have turned him into an individual whose active (and proactive) devotion to *tzedakah* is exemplary. In the process, it seems that they have, in a manner we might consider unseemly, entered Job, Abraham, and other biblical characters unwittingly into a *tzedakah* competition.

This is, I hasten to add, a characteristic rabbinic turn. First, along with the abstractions of philosophy, Judaism has always emphasized the realities of the world-as-it-is. In this light, it was customary to highlight the features of a given individual, biblical or post-biblical, as someone we should emulate or, alternatively, avoid.

Second, Abraham is a revered figure not only for Jews, but also for Christians and Muslims. Without ignoring distinctive elements in each religion’s appropriation of the Patriarch, I am convinced that we can also find common elements through which we can come together in mutually satisfying ways. The picture of Abraham as one who sought out the needs of others and responded with selfless hospitality and kindness is one that we can all embrace and emulate.

Conclusion

Throughout this article I have used the Hebrew term *tzedakah* (from the root meaning “righteous”) to describe the help – material, spiritual, or psychological – that one human (or group of humans) provides to another human (or group of humans). As we have seen, this Hebrew term does have semantic overlap with the English word “charity” (which comes from the Latin). Nonetheless, each term has distinctive nuances, such that we have purposely avoided using the terms as if they were synonyms.

Outside of Chasidic communities (whose leaders are designated as *tzaddiks*), it is far more common for Jews to describe someone as doing or carrying out *tzedakah* in practical ways than it is to designate someone rather abstractly as being “righteous.” At a higher level still, we might speak of a person who seeks out or pursues *tzedakah*, thus emphasizing the active role that is especially commended.

The first issue I dealt with in this article presents the overwhelming impression that in Judaism *tzedakah* is not only commended – it is commanded. It is an essential element in what it means to be a human. Surely, sometimes we feel as if we are helping others out of the goodness of our heart. Judaism does not discourage such a feeling. But even if, on occasion, we do not feel any particular empathy with the recipient, it is our duty to help those in need.

Two related issues seem to arise naturally from this insight. First is the observation that Jewish tradition appears to value *tzedakah* more as a fulfillment of the recipient’s needs than as an action that rewards the donor with any sort of satisfaction. This is not so clear-cut as other issues relating to this topic, but, at least in the view of some interpreters, it is an evaluation that differentiates Judaism from Christianity.

The second related issue has to do with the community-centered obligation that continues to this day to characterize worldwide as well as local or national Judaism. Being Jews has traditionally been understood to mean, among other things, being a member of the Jewish community. Thus it is that today almost all Jewish communities, from those numbering in the hundreds to those counting hundreds of thousands, establish a Jewish Federation, which raises funds, in the name of the community, for local, national, and international causes. These community funds do, of course, ultimately derive from the contributions of individuals, but their status as representative of the collective concern is not thereby appreciably diminished.

Within Jewish tradition there is little romanticization of the barely tolerable circumstances in which the poor live. To voluntarily adopt poverty is not a widely regarded option. Experience – cold, hard experience – shows how debasing poverty is; in the reality of our lived experience, there are few things worse than being poor.

This is, almost certainly, not the way in should be, but it is, with equal certainty, the way it is. Jewish tradition does not criticize those who are poor, but it also does not elevate them rhetorically. What is called for, in fact, are not words, but actions – and these actions, which serve to raise the poor from the depths of their affliction, are *tzedakah*. Thus, the affirmation that the poor are/will always be among us is not a statement of resignation, but rather an affirming call to action.

Alas, not all of those who present themselves as needy are truly deserving. *Tzedakah*, which is intended to bring out the best, sometimes also attracts the worst. Jewish tradition recognizes this and allows for it. Better to bestow some help upon the undeserving than to refuse help to the deserving under the guise of a justifiable, but ultimately unjustified concern that some of our resources will be misappropriated.

The goal of *tzedakah* has been, if I may use this term, generously applied. Not only do the undeserving sometimes benefit, but even the deserving recipient is treated with unusual respect as an individual. This is seen through the teaching that each poor person should be restored to his/her previous position. It is not difficult to imagine that some of the stories illustrative of this practice are hyperbolic; nonetheless, even this hyperbole must be built on a core of reality. And this reality consists of the fact that the dignity of each individual must be taken into account in determining the degree and direction of *tzedakah* to be offered to her or him.

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