

We Are All Equal in Tzedekah
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A man named Bill was reading through his newspapers and magazines and came across the statistic that half a million children die every year from rotavirus. Rotavirus is the most common cause of severe gastrointestinal distress in children. He had never heard of rotavirus and asked himself, “how could I never have heard of something that kills half a million children every year?”

He then learned that in developing countries, millions of children die from diseases that have been eliminated, or virtually eliminated in the United States. Every day, more than 1,000 children die because they didn’t get a 15-cent measles vaccine. Now he was really shocked, because he assumed that if there are vaccines and treatments that could save lives, governments would be doing everything possible to get them to the people who need them.

The knowledge that millions of children were dying unnecessarily haunted him. As he has said, he “could not escape the brutal conclusion that—in our world today—some lives are seen as worth saving and others are not.” He did not want this to be so. He believes strongly that all lives—no matter where they are being led—have equal value. But he saw that it was so in reality. In that moment, he realized that he had the capacity to help save lives and repair this injustice in the world. In 2000 Bill Gates and his wife Melinda gave \$30 billion dollars to create a foundation aimed at reducing poverty, disease and premature death in the developing world. Just this past year, Warren Buffett doubled the size of the foundation with his \$33 billion gift.

In the year 2000, another campaign was begun. A four-year old cancer patient decided to raise money to “help her doctors” find a cure for kids with cancer. In July of 2000, Alex and her brother Patrick set up the first "Alex's Lemonade Stand for Childhood Cancer" on their front lawn. Alex decided to fight cancer “one cup at a time.” This simple idea inspired others who would not usually participate in fundraising or philanthropy, especially children, to organize and raise money for childhood cancer.

For the next four years, despite her deteriorating health, Alex held an annual lemonade stand to raise money for childhood cancer research. Following her inspirational example, thousands of lemonade stands have been held across the country primarily by children, over 8,000 since 2004, all to benefit Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation for childhood cancer. Lemonades stands have been organized by a diverse group of volunteers including inner city school children, senior centers, pre-school aged children, a juvenile detention center, college students, and a group of homeless people. The lesson that children and adults everywhere learn from holding their own lemonade stands is simple but powerful - every person can make a difference in the world.

Alex died peacefully on August 1st, 2004 and in her short, rich lifetime she inspired a movement that continues to this day to raise money for childhood cancer research. As of June 2007, Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation has raised over \$12 million for childhood cancer research across the country!

A billionaire and a little girl. Each one had a cause, a moment when they realized something needed to be done, and they were able to do it. Whether it's billions of dollars or collections of quarters, the money was being put to good purposes—to save lives. Rabbi Michael Strassfeld teaches that “every act of tzedekah is an act of life in the face of death...Every poor person is a critique of the notion of God's goodness.”

While not everyone makes billions or even millions...while not everyone can give on an equal level, every one can make a difference in the world with their money.

In Jewish teachings, the amount of money that is given is not **determined**, it is the act of giving that is the mitzvah. We are all equal in our responsibility to give tzedekah.

Tzedekah is not charity; it is mitzvah. It is that which compels us to give money to help others, to help those in need, to relieve suffering and cure injustice. The word tzedekah comes from the Hebrew word meaning a righteous or just act. The word charity is derived from the Latin word caritaten, which means love, benevolence or kindness. The fundamental difference between charity and tzedekah is that charity is a human attitude and tzedekah is a human act. It is an action that we take out of a sense of justice or the recognition of injustice and our responsibility to act.

There are many reasons behind people's giving. Some people give because they have more money than they feel they need. Zell Kravinsky became well-known in 2002 when he gave away most of his \$45 million real estate fortune to health-related organizations--\$6 million going to the CDC. When asked what that amount of money meant to him, he said: “To me, it would either be a charitable donation for some worthy cause or a bunch of high tech toys that I'm not really interested in.”

Some people give because they feel obligated to give and see it as part of their covenant with God. For some, they don't see their possessions as their own but God's. As God is sovereign over the earth and all that is in it, they look to God's commandments to guide them in their giving. Many people take the system of tithing in the Bible very seriously and even set up separate bank accounts called “tithing accounts” to collect and set aside 10% of their earnings to go to charitable organizations, as 10% was to be given to the priests in the ancient Temple.

Some people give their money to causes that connect them to their community—whether it is giving to one’s alma mater or one’s synagogue. The monetary gift goes to maintain a connection or nurture a connection and establish one’s identity as part of that community. We also give when we sense that there is need in our community. Out of a sense of responsibility and caring, people give to keep their own community intact and strong. Some of us give because our friend asked us to give. Or, we give because we have a personal interest in the money’s destination—for example, we suffer from a disease, or our loved one, so we support the foundation that works for a cure.

Now matter why we give or how much we give, we are united and equalized in our responsibility to give. In the Shulchan Arukh we are taught that all are obligated to give tzedekah. Even the poor who are sustained by tzedekah are required to give from what they are given. (YD 248:1). What is the proscribed amount to give? The Shulchan Arukh teaches: If you have sufficient for your means, give what the poor need and if you don’t have sufficient for your means, extremely generous would be to give up to 1/5 (20%); 1/10 (10%) is the mean; and less than this looks bad.

Notice that the law code does not determine the amount of money that we must give but rather gives us two determining factors. First, we must consider our own financial health. If we are able to live above our means, we are to give what we can and where we can. If we are struggling to live within our means, only then are we given guidelines, and then they are not clear cut. You could give 20%, you could give 10%, you could give 5%.

The Shulkhan Arukh certainly places value on the higher percentage but then it continues with this teaching: One should never withhold less than 1/3 of a shekel annually. And, if you do, you have not fulfilled the obligated amount for tzedekah. What is 1/3 of a shekel? Less than 33cents. What is the meaning of such a small minimum for ANNUAL tzedekah? It occurs to me that the law is set up to allow even the poorest amongst us to fulfill their responsibility of giving tzedekah with dignity.

How do we decide where to give our tzedekah? There is a strong trend in Jewish tradition that the community must first help its own. In his Mishneh Torah, Maimonides presents concentric circles of care and concern.

He teaches: A poor person who is your relative should receive your charity before all others; and likewise the poor of your own household have priority over the poor of your city; and the poor of your city have priority over the poor of another city as it is stated in Torah [you must give] ‘to poor and needy brothers in your land’(Deut 15:11)” (Laws of Tzedekah 7:17)

The act of giving tzedekah with a common purpose unites individuals, strengthening families, creating community and guaranteeing continuity.

On the one hand you might hear this and consider it too self-interested to be generous. On the other hand, the law is directing us not to forget the people in need who are right in front of us and often get overlooked. Often we feel sympathy for starving people far away and forget about those in need in our own backyard.

While the tradition placed the priority on giving to support the needs of our own community first, in a remarkable provision for its time, the Talmud and later Jewish law taught that we must care for non-Jews as well as Jews. As we are taught:

In a city with both Jews and [nonJews], the collectors of charity collect from Jews and non-Jews for the sake of peace; we support the poor among nonJews along with the Jewish poor for the sake of peace; [we visit the sick among nonJews with the sick among Jews;] we mourn and bury the non-Jewish dead [assuming that they do not do that themselves] for the sake of peace; and we comfort those mourning nonJews for the sake of peace. (Tosefta Gittin 3:18, BT Gittin 61a)

The commandment to give tzedekah comes from the Torah, Parashat Reeh, in which we are told: If there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsmen.

Based on this verse we learn the answer to the question of whether we are obligated to give to the beggar who asks us for money on the street. According to Jewish law, the answer is yes. Your fellow human being, b'tzelem elohim, is standing before you in need. When he asks, we must answer. The rabbis have the concerns, as we often do, about how the money will be spent and how you can prevent the perpetuation of the beggar's condition...but, in the end, we are taught that we need to respond.

The Torah tells us it is preferable to give a loan: "Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs." We are cautioned to give without anger, resentment or ill feelings. And then we are taught: "give to him readily and have not regrets when you do so, for in return the Lord your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsmen in your land."(Deut 15: 7-11)

The existence of injustice and imbalance in society is the reality presented by the Torah and so it demands of us tzedekah. We cannot rely on individuals' feelings of generosity that can wax and wane, we need to remember that tzedekah is our responsibility. There is always work for us to be doing to repair the world and raise up our society.

While reading about Bill and Melinda Gates I was overwhelmed with the realization of the powerful things that people can do with their money. Positive things that is. I've also read about the \$8 billion that is estimated will be spent on the presidential campaigns for the upcoming election and the \$127 billion that has supposedly been spent on Katrina relief. Some good that money is doing. How is it even possible? As my head spins with the enormity of these amounts and the enormity of human suffering in our country, in Israel, around the world...it is easy to get lost.

The Gates foundation work is driven by two core values:

- All lives—no matter where they are being led—have equal value. We express this as the assertion that all of us are created b'tzelem elohim...
- To whom much is given, much is expected.

Each one of us is given so many blessings, whether we are given millions or not. And tzedekah is our way of acknowledging our blessings and sharing them with others. Tzedekah saves lives. Tzedekah repairs the brokenness in our society and in our community. Tzedekah begins at home and connects us to others in our own neighborhood and across the globe—in Israel, in Darfur, in Eastern Europe...

What stands at the heart of the most inspiring stories of tzedekah is the moment when the giver realized an injustice and realized that he or she could do something about it. Once that happens there is no stopping the potential for good that can come about as the result of tzedekah.

Lucy Kellaway is a columnist for the Financial Times. In writing about the differences between millionaires and the rest of us, she states that “millionaires are concerned about ideas while the middle classes are interested in things and other people.” She might be right when it comes to philanthropy but when it comes to tzedekah, she got it wrong. Tzedekah is meant to be about “ideas” and it is meant to be performed by each and every one of us, not just the wealthy!

This year, I encourage you to think about the ideas that you want to put into action with your tzedekah. Where do you see needs in your own community? Certainly our own capital campaign and renovation plans that seek to make our synagogue accessible to all

people throughout the building and right up to the bimah is compelling, as well as the plans for a heating and air-conditioning system that is efficient and environmentally-responsible. Certainly giving to organizations like Jewish Family Services and UJC MetroWest addresses the needs of families that are struggling and in need here in our own backyard as well as in Israel and around the world.

Our B'nei Mitzvah students form their mitzvah projects after reviewing the ideas and issues that are important to them. I ask them what problem in the world makes them so angry or upset when they hear about it that they want to scream and jump up and down. I am asking them to find that issue of injustice or need that is calling out to their hearts so that they can take action.

Eric Firenze is beyond his Bar Mitzvah and recently completed college. He looked around and realized how expensive college textbooks are. Today's college student can expect to pay around \$800 for a year's worth of books and more if they are taking very technical courses. Eric wants to help struggling students by collecting and distributing college textbooks. We'll be collecting them here at Beth El, more details to follow. I'm sure he is inspired in his tzedekah work by his mother who helps staff our local soup kitchen and collect leftover food for synagogue events to be served to local poor. Leah Firenze-Kuperman and Rich Kuperman are just a few of the many mitzvah-heroes in our own community.

There are matters of justice and need that present themselves to us in Metrowest, in Israel, in Darfur and around the world. It is for each one of us to decide not whether we are giving, but how much are we giving and to whom?

Maimonides teaches that "the highest level of tzedekah, exceeded by none, is that of the person who assists a poor Jew by providing him with a gift or a loan or by helping him find employment. In a word by putting him where he can dispense with other people's aid by supporting himself—and so he won't have to ask from anyone. Helping like this helps strengthen the one in need." (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10:7-14)

The famous Chinese proverb puts it this way: "Give a man a fish; you have fed him for today. Teach a man to fish; and you have fed him for a lifetime" I want to end by telling you about Beth El's building campaign for this year.

You will find a drawing in the lobby of the plans for the renovation of our synagogue funded by our Capital Campaign. I want to thank Ed and Dianne Stein and Susan and Mitch Lieberman for seeing a need and stepping forward to help do something about it. Our plans are modest, the goals clear. I hope you'll come to the Meeting October ___ to hear more including a presentation by the architect. As each Israelite stepped forward to provide for the ancient Tabernacle, each one of us should step forward and contribute to the best of our ability, as our heart moves us. This campaign isn't saving lives, but it is bringing life back to this tired, overworked building and so invigorating our synagogue for a bright future.

While we are building for ourselves, we are also building for others. As you might have read in the New Jersey Jewish News, our congregation is joining Habitat for Humanity Newark with other houses of worship and spiritually and ethically based organizations in South Orange, Maplewood, Irvington and Newark to build a house in Newark which we are calling the Abraham House. [You can find more information about the Abraham House....] This project was started by Prospect Presbyterian Church. They recently ran a capital campaign to renovate their church and decided to raise money to build for others as well. Their gift became the charge to the community to join together to build a home for a family in Newark. The plot of land was donated by a member of Ahavos Sholom in Newark. And ground breaking will take place.....This project represents the greatest level of giving by providing a family with the means to take care of themselves and become self-sufficient...

I hope you will join me in building for ourselves by contributing to the capital campaign and building for others by either donating money or time to the Abraham House. Thank you to Sara and Brian McNamara and Howard Fisher and Kate McCaffrey for stepping forward with an idea and their leadership.

The last teaching on this subject that I want to leave you with this morning is the rabbinic promotion: *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, one mitzvah breeds another. In a great article on young Jewish philanthropy in Hadassah magazine, I found this story: In 1917, 27-year old Sarah Wetsman and her mother, Bessie, hosted Henrietta Szold for 10 days in their Detroit home and were instrumental in founding Hadassah's Detroit chapter; a year later, in 1918, Sarah gave \$1,000 (borrowed from her father) toward the purchase of an ambulance to send as part of a medical mission of that Hadassah and the JDC were sending to Palestine. Fast forward 80 years to 2007: Sarah Westsman's son, William Davidson, has just donated \$75 million toward the construction of a new inpatient tower at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem." *Mitzvah goreret Mitzvah. Tzedekah goreret tzedekah*. Remember it's not the amount of money that is proscribed but the very act of giving itself that unites us all in the responsibility of tzedekah. Think about how much you want to give. Think about the areas of need, suffering and injustice that are calling out to you. And, then, as you are giving make sure to explain to your children and grandchildren what you are doing and why so that they can learn and be inspired in the important mitzvah of tzedekah.

In the u'Netaneh Tokef prayer we chant—u'tefilah u'teshuvah u'tzedekah ma'avirin et roa ha-gezerah...But prayer, repentance and tzedekah lessen the severity of the decree. At this new year, may we each be inspired to give our tzedekah as expressions of our greatest values—love for our fellow human beings, desire for justice and equity, concern for the well-being of our community...whatever it is that inspires you.

May we find joy in sharing our blessings with others in the upcoming New Year...and may it be a year of more life than death, more light than darkness, more blessings than suffering.

Shanah Tovah U'metukah!

