

# PROVIDING FOR THE NEEDY

*by Rabbi Yehudah Prero*

In Orech Chayim 429:7, the Aruch HaShulchan writes: "All of the nation of Israel has the custom (in the month of Nissan) to collect '*Ma'os Chittim*' - to purchase flour for the poor for Pesach, or to give them money so they can purchase it for themselves."

The custom of contributing "*Ma'os Chittim*," literally "money for wheat," is widespread. Not only do we contribute money to provide for the flour (and therefore Matzos) of the poor, but to provide as well for all the needed Pesach provisions. While providing this assistance is important, of equal importance is how the assistance is provided. We must do all that we can to assure that the recipients of the Ma'os Chittim are not embarrassed by their destitute situation. In order to avoid the embarrassment, many communities or congregations have Ma'os Chittim funds, where a contributor gives the money to the fund, and only those responsible for disbursing the funds know the identity of the recipients. That way, a recipient never knows who is providing him with the charity, thereby reducing any potential for embarrassment.

There is a story about Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzenski of Vilna (1863-1940) that vividly illustrates the concern we must have for the feelings of the recipients of the charity which we give.

In Vilna, Rabbi Grodzenski's concern and actions done for the welfare of the community, especially the poor, were well known. After prayers on the night of the Seder, a man approached Rabbi Grodzenski, who was standing in the front of the synagogue. He quietly told the Rabbi that he and his family had just arrived in Vilna that morning. He therefore had absolutely no provisions for Pesach, and he was hoping the Rabbi could help him out. Rabbi Grodzenski wanted to help this man out in a manner that no one would be aware of the man's personal situation. Rabbi Grodzenski pretended that this man had just come to ask him a Halachic question. In a booming voice, he said "Its not Kosher. I'm sorry, but all that you prepared for Pesach cannot be eaten. It is not Kosher." People standing around the Rabbi heard this "decision." They felt sorry for this man, who they assumed had prepared a complete Pesach feast, only to be told that he cannot eat any of it. Immediately, the man began receiving offers of food and supplies from all the congregates. He was able to have a complete Pesach celebration without having to ask others for food, and without anyone knowing of his desperate situation.

When it comes to helping those of our brothers and sisters who are needy, we need not only to extend an open hand, but we also need to help with a smile. When it comes to giving away "our" hard earned money, this may seem difficult. The same person who would not flinch at buying a high

priced Esrog for himself, or paying large sums to purchase the finest Pesach provisions for themselves, may find it difficult to share with others. We need to remember that G-d provides us with the money that we have, and we are to use it properly. Giving charity is not merely a nice and honorable gesture. It is also a commandment from G-d, just as observing Shabbos and keeping Kosher are commandments. By giving charity, especially before Pesach, we are not only helping others; we are helping ourselves as well. The following story demonstrates how one who thinks that charity has nothing to do with serving G-d is viewed by those who know better.

Reb Chaim from Volozhin (1749-1821) was known for his sharp and keen insights into all matters, both secular and religious. He was very aware of what was happening around him, and personally assured that those in need were cared for. In the city of Volozhin, there was an extremely wealthy Jewish lady. This woman was very smart, and considered herself very pious and meticulous in her religious practices. However, this woman was "famous" for her stinginess. She did not want anyone to share in her wealth. If her husband brought a guest home with him, she would become bitter and make their lives miserable.

One year before Pesach, this woman had a Halachic quandary. On Pesach, we have a custom to recline at the Seder while drinking the wine and eating the Matzo. Because we want to demonstrate that we are a nation of free people on the Seder night, we recline, which is what aristocrats would do when eating their meals. We only recline at those times when what we are eating has a positive connotation, representing freedom. When eating the Maror, Bitter Herbs, which represents slavery, we do not recline. In addition to this time when we do not recline, there is discussion if women and those who are part of the aristocracy need to recline at all. It was this latter discussion that concerned the woman in Volozhin: Was she, a distinguished woman, required to recline at the Seder? She sent this query with a messenger to Reb Chaim.

Reb Chaim, knowing who he was dealing with, sent a message back to the lady. He said that the Gemora in the tractate of Pesachim states that a distinguished woman needs to recline. However, he added, there is another Gemora that is relevant to the situation. The Gemora which Reb Chaim was referring to stated that "by (eating) Maror, one need not recline." However, Reb Chaim used this Gemora in a non-literal sense to teach the woman a lesson. He said "The Gemora says 'Maror - one who is bitter - need not recline!'"

(Stories adapted from the book Bircas Chayim)