

TZEDAKAH: A CHARITABLE CAUSE

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah: When it comes to giving tzedakah, the Jew is obligated for a Jew to open out his heart. In a loving, wholehearted manner, he is to bestow kindness and charity to all those in need. This commandment goes beyond offering a modest monetary contribution to relieve one's conscience. Instead, the focus, at all times, is on the welfare and betterment of his fellow human beings - Jew and non-Jew alike - such that every attempt is made to uphold the dignity of the beneficiary.

The reason why a Jew gives extra concern to this mitzvah, explains Maimonides (Laws of Giving to the Poor 10:1), is because "performance of charitable actions is a sure sign that one is a righteous descendant of Avraham, as it states 'I [G-d] have loved him [Avraham] because he commands his children and his household after him that they keep the way of G-d, doing tzedakah' (Genesis 18:19).

The Jewish preoccupation on giving charity has its roots in the illustrious example of Avraham, whose kindness was showered to one and all. Indeed, the magnanimity of the frail, one hundred-year old patriarch, just three days after his circumcision and his exemplary hospitality, jars, most strikingly, with the Torah's narrative chartering Sodom's wickedness and destruction.

Ideologically opposed to all that Avraham represented, the citizens of Sodom outlawed all acts of kindness and charity. Hospitality and benevolence were criminal offenses - such that Lot placed himself in grave danger by emulating his uncle and inviting the three guests into his home. In the end, only Lot and his two unwed daughters escaped the Wrath of G-d overturning the lush and fertile lands of Sodom and her environs (Genesis 13:10) into "sulphur and salt, a conflagration of the whole Land, it cannot be sown and it cannot sprout." (Deuteronomy 29:22).

The townsfolk's failure to fulfill charitable acts led to their appropriate comeuppance in death and their fertile land reduced into a barren wasteland.

Tzedakah involves emulating G-d's altruistic acts of goodness, namely the bestowing of oneself - and one's energies and assets - onto others. This is some of the depth in the observation "More does the poor man do for the rich man, than the rich man does for the poor man" (Midrash, Vayikra Rabbah 34:8). It is a mistake to think that it is just the recipient who benefits; rather, it attunes and refines the giver himself because, with his very acts of kindness, he is imitating G-d "the Supreme Giver".

However the Sedomite's philosophy of "what's yours is yours, what's mine is mine" (Ethics of the Fathers 5:13) precluded developing any interrelationship with one's fellow man. It fails -on the most

basic level - to foster kindness and charity to all members of mankind - even those outside the boundaries of Sedom. Being members of society imparts mutual responsibility. It behooves man to interact and relate with others, granting him umpteen opportunities for kindness and charities.

King Solomon proclaimed "Tzedakah saves from death" (Proverbs 10:2). Charity relieves the recipient and preserves his life. Consequently, not enacting tzedakah to fellow humans that prolongs life, the corrupt town of Sedom was automatically doomed to certain and immediate death.

Giving of tzedakah is termed "planting", as in the words of the prophet "Sow charity for yourself and you will reap according to kindness" (Hosea 10:12). The Jewish approach to life is where a person sees all his acquisitions - without exception - as potential investments. Thus life is all about "investing in eternity". How does he do this? Certainly not by squandering his wealth on transient objects - on grand mansions, fast cars or fine food! Instead, his possessions are viewed as "seeds" that he has to "sow" and "plant" in this world. Only then, will he benefit to thereafter reap the "fruit" of his labor in the timeless rewards in the world to come. That is what tzedakah is all about.

Conversely, the people of Sedom's lack of tzedakah belied a spiritual ability to grow and invest their riches to earn eternity. Not only did they not refine the divine trait of being a "giver", all their wealth was squandered and was for naught. The everlasting legacy commemorating their destruction was their land's inability to be "sown" and to "sprout" vegetation (Deuteronomy 29:22). This reflects the spiritual reality - that the people of Sedom were not "productive" and would not inherit any portion in the world to come (Talmud, Sanhedrin 107).

Symptomatic of their identity as Avraham's descendants, the Jewish people's pursuit of tzedakah is the surefire sign of their heritage. They rightly expend all their efforts and energies in each and every charitable cause in this precious mitzvah. Text Copyright © 2005 by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene and **Torah.org**.