

TZEDAKAH VS. CHARITY: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

... And you see among the captives a desirable, beautiful woman who you want to marry. . . (Devarim 21:10)

Charity begins at home. That may be true, but it is tzedakah that makes the greatest difference to the outside world.

But aren't they exactly the same act? Sometimes yes, and sometimes, in a very big way, no. They may look like exactly the same thing at times, but in fact, they are very different from each other. And, with Rosh Hashanah about to begin in just two and a half weeks, b"H, it is important to understand how, and why.

Let's start with a definition of charity:

char·i·ty

Noun

1. The voluntary giving of help, typically money, to those in need
2. Help or money given in this way

Synonyms

alms - mercy - beneficence - benevolence - philanthropy

So far, this sounds like tzedakah as well. When people think of tzedakah, both the giving and receiving of it, they think of money given to a person who lacks the financial means to take care of even his most basic needs. A philanthropist is someone who, upon seeing the need of such a person, opens his hand and shares his wealth with him.

However, what is the halachah, of which there are many for giving tzedakah, if the person in need is lazy? What if the person collecting tzedakah is someone who could be working to make his own living, but has chosen to live off the consciences and free hand-outs of generous others?

The black-and-white halachah? It is forbidden to give anything to such a poor person. This is because whereas charity is a means to financially help the poor, either with money or something else of value, tzedakah is a way to give a person what he really needs, and what he would really want if he knew better. But what else is there?

The Talmud makes the following statement:

It was taught: Four are considered to be like dead people: A poor man, a leper, a blind person, and one who is childless. A poor man, as it says, "For all the men [who wanted to kill you] are dead" (Shemos 4:19). (Nedarim 64b)

This seems like a harsh assessment, especially of some of those people who may have found themselves in their predicament for no fault of their own. However, the question is not so much how they got into their positions, but the impact it has once they get there, which is why, almost without exception, such people work so hard to get out of them.

To appreciate what each of these four has in common, we must recall the following verse:

God said, "Let us make man in Our image, in our likeness." (Bereishis 1:26)

According to the Arizal, to live up to this statement is to become an Adam Shalaim, a complete person (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 18), the goal of every human being. We don't have much of a choice, because we have been hard-wired this way by virtue of the fact that we have a soul, which itself is a piece of Divine Light.

Life is the stage on which we are able to perform acts that allow us to achieve this goal, and the Torah is the book that tells us which acts allow us to succeed, and which ones bring failure. It is no coincidence that Hitler, ysv"z, a Social Darwinist by self-admission, was capable of both of abolishing the concept of tzedakah and of the most barbaric of acts.

He ignored the Torah in favor of worldly experience, drawing an analogy between the animal kingdom and the human condition. Just as the jungle, he reasoned, only allows the strong to survive, and provides no artificial means to keep the weak afloat, likewise society should allow the poor and weak to die off on their own without an artificial means of support.

Among the many intellectual errors he made, this is the greatest, and is what made him the most evil. Animals were not made b'Tzelem Elokim and therefore they are not expected to strive to be anything more than they already are. It is a world, for the most part, that was created to allow the strong (whether it is physical or mental strength) to survive, and the weak to die off.

Not man, however. As the Sforno points out on this verse, a Tzelem Elokim is what we are created as, and even that is only a potential. Over the course of our lives, we are supposed to work on ourselves until we stop being only a Tzelem-Elokim, and actually become an Elohim, a term that can be used for God, angels, and even human judges.

This is what life is about. To the degree that a person loses his ability to function as an Elohim, that is the extent to which a person lacks life, and needs help to regain that capacity. This is what the Talmud states:

Evil people, even when alive, are dead. (Brochos 18a)

This is what it means to be evil, to willingly abandon one's sense of Godliness. This is what it means to be dead: to be unable to act as a Tzelem Elokim in some capacity, by helping others, something a poor person has difficulty doing, especially while he is busy just trying to survive.

This is what it means to perform an act of tzedakah. Tzedakah goes past charity inasmuch as its goal is to help a person to gain or regain a capacity to be more like an Elohim. Sometimes this might mean giving a person a free hand-out, sometimes it might mean closing one's hand and forcing the person to try and find a job.

The connection to this week's parshah should be a little more obvious at this point. One of the greatest casualties of war, with which this week's parshah begins, is a person's Elokus—Godliness. War knocks mankind down a few levels, to the point that we begin to resemble Hitler's, ysv'z, version of mankind more than God's.

The taking of a yafas toar, the 'beautiful' gentile female captive is just one casualty of war. We're not talking about a secular soldier for whom spiritual greatness is not a personal goal in life. The Torah is talking about a soldier who learns Torah and performs all relevant mitzvos on a regular basis. This is a soldier who normally, when it is time to get married, goes out on shidduchim and performs Kiddushin and Chupah before being intimate with his wife.

The fact that such a holy person can act in such an unholy way shows just how powerful a distraction, and therefore how destructive, war can be, both the one we fight against the external enemy, and the one we fight against the inner enemy: the yetzer hara, whose goal it is to reduce a person to nothing more than a glorified animal.

Hence, just as charity begins at home, so does tzedakah, especially at this time of year. Do tzedakah for yourself and the ones you love by taking the time to see where it is you are most vulnerable to lose your sense of Elokus, and devise methods to save yourself and your loved ones from such situations. This too is what it means to be a Ba'al Tzedakah, one who is 'owns' the mitzvah of tzedakah.

Text

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