

## Unit 2 Ethical Giving

The giving of *tsedakkah* raises many ethical questions. This is not an exhaustive guide to a set of Jewish answers, but rather an exploration of one classic response to a question that has not changed: who should I help, and how?

The great Jewish legal thinker and philosopher Moses Maimonides classified the various possible ways of giving *tsedakkah*, creating a 'ladder' of eight possible rungs.

### Maimonides, *Laws of Gifts to the Poor* 10:7

#### Rung number 8

There are eight rungs of *tsedakkah*, each higher than the other, and the highest of them all is one who strengthens the hand of a fellow Jew, and gives him a gift or a loan, or enters into a business partnership with him or finds him a job, in order to strengthen his hand until he has no further need to ask of anyone else. Concerning this is said as it is said, "Strengthen him, the stranger and the resident alien, so that he *lives* with you" [Leviticus 25:35]. This is as if to say, strengthen him, so he will not fall, and become needy.

שמנה מעלות יש בצדקה  
זו למעלה מזו,  
מעלה גדולה שאין למעלה ממנה זה  
המחזיק ביד ישראל שמך  
ונותן לו מתנה או הלואה  
או עושה עמו שותפות  
או ממציא לו מלאכה  
כדי לחזק את ידו  
עד שלא יצטרך לבריות לשאול,  
ועל זה נאמר  
וְהִחֲזַקְתָּ בּוֹ גֵר וְתוֹשֵׁב וְחֵי עִמָּךְ:  
כלומר החזק בו  
עד שלא יפול ויצטרך.

Given that Maimonides begins his list with the highest rather than the lowest rung of the ladder, why do you think he put the *gift* before the loan, the business partnership and the job in this list?

Justice justice

you shall pursue



**Rung 7**

The next rung down is the one who gives *tsedakkah* to the poor and does so without knowing to whom, and the poor person does not know from whom s/he receives.

One does this purely for the sake of performing the the mitzvah itself, like the Hall of Secret Donations in the Temple.

In those days, the righteous would place donations there in secret and the poor of good families [people like any other whose circumstances changed and found themselves in poverty] would sustain themselves from this in secret.

Similar to this is the one who places a donation into the *tsedakkah* box. A person must not put money into the collection unless he knows that the *tsedakkah* administrator is trustworthy and wise and conducts himself fairly, like Rabbi Chananiah ben Teradion.

**Rung 6**

Below this is the case where the donor knows to whom s/he gives, but the poor person doesn't know from whom s/he receives, such as in the days when the greatest of the sages would go in secret and leave gifts of money at the doorways of the poor.

This is the right thing to do and the correct 'rung' of the ladder if the collection and distribution of *tsedakkah* is not being handled properly [within a community, as it should be].

פחות מזה הנותן צדקה לעניים  
ולא ידע למי נתן  
ולא ידע העני ממי לקח,  
הרי זו מצוה לשמה,  
כגון לשכת חשאים שהיתה במקדש,  
שהיו הצדיקים נותנין בה בחשאי  
והעניים בני טובים מתפרנסין ממנה  
בחשאי.

וקרוב לזה הנותן לתוך קופה  
של צדקה, ולא יתן אדם לתוך  
קופה של צדקה אלא אם כן  
יודע שהמונה נאמן וחכם  
ויודע להנהיג כשורה  
כ' חנניה בן תרדיון.

פחות מזה שידע הנותן למי יתן  
ולא ידע העני ממי לקח,  
כגון גדולי החכמים  
שהיו הולכין בסתר  
ומשליכין המעות בפתחי  
העניים,  
וכזה ראוי לעשות  
ומעלה טובה היא  
אם אין הממונין בצדקה נוהגין  
כשורה.

Justice justice

you shall pursue

**Rung number 5**

Lower than this is the case where the poor person knows from whom s/he receives, but the donor doesn't know to whom s/he gives.

This happened in the days when the sages used to bundle coins in their scarves and roll them up over their backs and poor people would come and collect, since this would cause them no embarrassment.

פחות מזה שידע העני ממאי נטל ולא ידע הנותן,

כגון גדולי החכמים שהיו צוררים המעות בסדיניהן ומפשילין לאחוריהן ובאין העניים ונוטלין כדי שלא יהיה להן בושה.

**Rung number 4**

Lower than this is the one who gives directly, into the hand of the other, before he asks.

פחות מזה שיתן לו בידו קודם שישאל.

**Rung number 3**

Lower still is the one who gives another after being asked.

פחות מזה שיתן לו אחר שישאל.

**Rung number 2**

Lower than this is the one who gives less than is fitting but with a pleasant attitude.

פחות מזה שיתן לו פחות מן הראוי בסבר פנים יפות

**Rung number 1**

Lowest of all is the one who gives unwillingly.

פחות מזה שיתן לו בעצב.

Donating money can put a person into a powerful position.  
Feeling dependant on donations can bring about feelings of shame.  
What does Maimonides' Ladder of *Tsedakkah* have to teach us about power and relationships?

### How do we decide who is a priority for *tsedakkah*?

Have a look at this grid below. Create a priority list for who, in your opinion, should be a priority for *tsedakkah*, by placing a 1 next to the most important, 2 for which comes next, 3 for the third etc.

your parents		your own livelihood
poor of other towns	your children	poor of your own town

How does your list match the list in the footnote <sup>1</sup> below?

Classical halachah seems to prioritise the one who has the greatest proximity or closeness, but today we live with a globalised outlook. An individual might choose to give money to the one who is the most physically distant, because our awareness of each other engenders a greater sense of responsibility.

We may consider that those closest to us are not in fact as poor as our own people once were, and our responsibility instead should extend to those who are further away.

How do you divide your *tsedakkah* giving, between the poor of your own town, Israel, and the world as a whole?

Members of Jewish communities were enjoined, and usually coerced (!) to give a minimum of 10% and a maximum of 20% of their yearly income, after taxes, to *tsedakkah*. This traditional strength may even be the basis of our commitment to philanthropy today. But *tsedakkah* is not philanthropy, since it is not about supporting or developing others on the basis of a shared interest, it is rather, about the support of those who need it the most, the poor. How does your community fulfil this fundamental Jewish obligation? And to what extent do you?

#### Final Thoughts

Did you learn anything surprising?

Was there any point where you strongly disagreed?

With the text? Or with each other?

Do you feel that any of your opinions have now changed?

What did you learn about our traditions?

What have you learned about yourself?

1. Jewish law recognises the following order of priority. One's own livelihood, the livelihood of one's parents, then one's children. The poor of one's own town and the poor of another town.