

Jewish Dimensions of Social Justice

Albert Vorspan
David Saperstein

Tzedakah

There is no word in the Hebrew vocabulary for "charity" in the modern sense. The word used is *tzedakah*, which literally means "righteousness." *Tzedakah* is not an act of condescension by the affluent toward the needy; it is the fulfillment of a moral obligation. Injustice to humanity is desecration of God. "One who mocks the poor blasphemes one's Maker." (Proverbs 17:5) Refusal to give charity is considered by Jewish tradition to be idolatry.

Our sages taught that Abraham was more righteous than Job. According to rabbinic tradition, when great suffering befell Job, he attempted to justify himself by saying, "Ruler of the world, have I not fed the hungry and clothed the naked?" (Job 16:22) God conceded that Job had done much for the poor, but he had always waited until the poor came to him, whereas Abraham had gone out of his way to search out the poor. He not only brought them into his home but set up inns on the highway to give the poor and the wayfarer access to food and drink in time of need. True charity is to "run after the poor." (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 104a)

An act of *tzedakah* is the means by which we restore the image of God to every human being. The sensitivities of recipients are to be safeguarded at all times. "Better no giving at all than the giving that humiliates." (Babylonian Talmud, *Hagigah* 5a) "One who gives charity in secret is even greater than Moses." (Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Batra* 9b) In the Temple at Jerusalem, there was a "chamber of secrecy" where the pious placed their gifts and the poor drew for their needs, all in anonymity. In later times, a *tzedakah* box marked *matan baseter* ("secret almsgiving") was placed in synagogues.

The sages regarded *gemilut chasadim* ("acts of loving-kindness") as being on a higher moral plane than *tzedakah*: "One who gives a coin to a poor person is rewarded with six blessings, but one who encourages that person with words is rewarded with seven blessings." (Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Batra* 9b)