

# Spiritual Healing in the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

## Parashat Re'eh

### What is the Difference Between Tzedakah and Charity?

#### To Give or Not to Give – My Tzedakah Dilemma

The mitzvah of giving tzedakah can be challenging at times. It seems that people asking for donations always manage to call at the most inconvenient times when I'm in the midst of writing and not prepared to slowly repeat the numbers on my credit card. Then there are the beggars who usually knock on doors during the evening hours. When my husband used to work night shifts, I didn't feel comfortable opening the door to beggars at night. On the other hand, being aware of the greatness of the mitzvah of giving tzedakah, I am haunted by guilt feelings whenever I feel compelled to turn down those who reach out for support. Furthermore, I know so very well on my own skin how it feels to be on the other side – to be the one who solicits for an excellent cause – but being told to call back at a certain hour several times before eventually being rejected. Although being a solicitor myself makes me empathize with other solicitors, to show my support, it also makes me less in a position to give to the innumerable good cause out there, because I have my own good cause that needs more support than I can ever afford. Yet, it is a positive mitzvah to give tzedakah to help poor people (*Devarim* 15:8; Rambam, *Mitzvot Aseh* 195), according to one's ability. (Rambam, *Matanot Aniyim* 7:1), One who hardens his heart and doesn't give violates a Torah command (*Devarim* 15:7-11; Rambam, *Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvah Aseh* 195). The Hebrew word for charity, תְּדָקָה/tzedakah means far more than just that. Charity implies kindness performed from the goodness of one's heart, doing more than what is obligatory. Tzedakah, on the other hand, means 'justice,' implying the obligation to help others. Ten percent of our income never belonged to us in the first place, Hashem entrusted us to be the custodian of this amount, to distribute it among the poor and use it to support worthy causes. When we keep this mitzvah of separating the *ma'aser* (a tenth of our income) we are performing an act of justice by returning the money to its rightful owners.

#### Why Does the Mitzvah of Tzedakah Outweigh All Other Mitzvot?

According to Rambam, we are obligated to be more careful to perform the mitzvah of tzedakah than any other positive mitzvah (*Matanot Aniyim* 10:5). Only, by means of this mitzvah is truth sustained and Israel established as it states, "With tzedakah shall you be established..." (*Yesha'yahu* 54:14). Furthermore, Israel is only redeemed through the merit of tzedakah as it states, "Tzion shall be redeemed through justice and her returnees through tzedakah (ibid. 1:27). What is so special about the mitzvah of tzedakah that it outweighs all other mitzvot? (*Baba Batra* 9a). The root of the mitzvah of tzedakah is emunah (faith) that everything we have in truth belongs to Hashem. We are not the owners of anything. It is not what we may mistakenly think "My strength and the might of my hand that has accumulated this wealth for me" (*Devarim* 8:17). Therefore, when we give, we return to Hashem what truly belongs to Him. This explains why tzedakah means justice. The perpetual awareness that just as everything that belongs to a slave indeed belongs to his master, so does everything – we think we have – in truth belong to the Master of the universe. This is the root of emunah. Since emunah is the most fundamental principle in the Torah, the mitzvah of tzedakah and Shabbat which also is all about emunah both outweigh all the mitzvot.

#### A Pleasant Demeanor is a Prerequisite for fulfilling the Mitzvah of Tzedakah

*Parashat Re'eh* teaches us that we must perform the mitzvah of tzedakah good-heartedly and with joy. If we gave tzedakah with an unpleasant demeanor we didn't fulfill the mitzvah as it states,

**ספר דברים פרק טו פסוק יז** כִּי יְהִי בְךָ אֶבְיוֹן מֵאֶחָיִךְ בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הָשִׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ לֹא תִאֲמָץ אֶת לִבְבְּךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת יָדְךָ מֵאֶחָיִךְ הָאֶבְיוֹן: (ח) כִּי פָתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת יָדְךָ לֹא וְהֵעֲבַט תִּעֲבִיטְנוּ דֵי מַחְסְרוֹ אֲשֶׁר יַחְסֵר לוֹ: (י) נָתַן תִּתֵּן לוֹ וְלֹא יֵרַע לִבְבְּךָ בְּתִתְּךָ לוֹ כִּי בְגַלְל הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה יִבְרַכְךָ הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכֹל מַעֲשֶׂיךָ וּבְכֹל מְשַׁלַּח יָדְךָ:

“If there will be among you a needy person, from one of your brothers in one of your cities, in your land that Hashem, your G-d, is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, and you shall not close your hand from your needy brother. Rather, you shall open your hand to him, and you shall lend him sufficient for his needs, which he is lacking... You shall surely give him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him; for because of this thing Hashem, your G-d, will bless you in all your work and in all your endeavors” (*Devarim* 15:7-8, 10).

Rashi explains that some people suffer [as they deliberate] whether they should give or not give; therefore, it says: “You shall not harden [your heart].” Others stretch out their hand [to give], but then close it. Therefore, it says: “nor close your hand” from your needy brother: If you do not give him, you will ultimately become a “brother of the needy” [i.e., becoming needy yourself]. - [*Sifrei*] The Maor V'Shemesh explains that the reason we don't make a blessing over giving tzedakah the way we make blessings for performing other mitzvot is that the mitzvah of tzedakah must be performed with joy, and since people often give tzedakah in a begrudging way and therefore don't fulfill the mitzvah, we don't recite a blessing beforehand to avoid saying a blessing in vain.

### **The Merit of the Mitzvah of Tzedakah Engender Cosmic and Individual Redemption**

When we live with the emunah required for fulfilling the mitzvah of tzedakah, it will be natural for us to fulfill it with joy and a pleasant demeanor. We will moreover live a happy, carefree, and satisfied life without worries and fears of loss. When we realize that nothing belongs to us, we are freed from fear and worry that it will be taken away from us. On the contrary, if we suffer a monetary loss, we will remember that Hashem has given and Hashem has taken, to grant us atonement for any sins we may have committed. Yet, if we give with a grieving heart, we do not fulfill the mitzvah of tzedakah, since giving with a pleasant demeanor is not an extra added good intention to the mitzvah of tzedakah. Rather, it is the most essential part of the mitzvah. This is because emunah is the core of the mitzvah of tzedakah, whereas giving with a heavy heart is an expression of a blemished emunah. So, if we don't give with a full heart, then it is considered as if we didn't perform the mitzvah of tzedakah at all. This explains why “Israel is only redeemed through the merit of tzedakah.” When we achieve the level of performing tzedakah to perfection, with a clarified faith that everything belongs to Hashem, it will bring about redemption for the community and for the individual. A person who gives a coin to the poor merits to receive the face of the Shechinah as it states, “I will see Your face with tzedek [from the root of tzedakah] ...” (*Tehillim* 17:15); (*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra* 10a). This applies even to a wicked person. When he perceives with complete emunah that everything belongs to Hashem, and G-d supervises all that happens to us, he is redeemed from his wickedness and is elevated to the highest levels.

### **EmunaHealing Exercise for Visualizing Giving and Receiving Tzedakah**

(Based on Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*)

1. Close your eyes and take several deep breaths. Fill your lungs completely on the in-breath and empty them all the way on the out-breath. Repeat this a couple of times, each time breathing deeper and deeper.

2. Let your mind wander to all your precious possessions. Perhaps a special fountain pen, or a sophisticated lightweight multitasking tablet with the most updated paraphernalia. It could be your lovely house, a favorite dress, or a pair of golden earrings. Anything that is uniquely yours, and that you would never want to part with. See if you can envision how each beloved item really belongs to Hashem, and you are only His entrusted servant who has received permission to use these items to serve Him.
3. Breathe into the process of relinquishing your precious possessions to Hashem, one by one. This isn't easy and we can only do the best we can to at least get a glimpse of what the awareness that everything belongs to Hashem would feel like. After you have done your best to give up your personal ownership, imagine how Hashem is now giving each item back to you, for you to use to serve Him. Visualize how you use your devices to promulgate Torah and kindness, how you dress in honor of Shabbat, and welcome guests into your home. Making good use of the wealth with which Hashem blesses you.
4. Now meditate on the four letters of Hashem's name. Visualize the shape of each of the letters. The small *yud* hanging in midair represents the first flash of wisdom. This letter is followed by the first *heh*, the analytic insight that fleshes out the flash of wisdom in concrete practical ways. Now visualize the *vav* - the hook - that connects the upper with the lower sefirot. At last, visualize the final *heh* which brings everything down into this physical world.
5. These four letters of the Tetragrammaton contain the mystery of tzedakah. The first letter, *yud*, denotes the coin that we want to give. This letter is small and simple like a coin. The second letter *heh* denotes the hand that gives the coin. Since *heh* is the fifth letter of the alphabet, it has a numerical value of five, alluding to the five fingers of the hand. The third letter, *vav*, which has the form of an arm, denotes the arm reaching out to give. Furthermore, in Hebrew, the word *vav* refers to a hook and has the connotation of connection, as the word for the conjunction 'and' is represented by the letter *vav* prefixed to a word. Finally, the fourth letter, the final *heh*, is the hand of the beggar who accepts the coin. This is the essence of charity on a physical level.
6. Imagine that your hand is a *heh*, holding the coin represented by the small *yud*. Visualize how you stretch out your arm represented by the *vav*, to offer your tzedakah. Can you envision the poor person's hand reaching out to receive your tzedakah?
7. Tzedakah can also be understood from a spiritual perspective. Hashem is the greatest donor, and the greatest tzedakah that He gives to us is existence itself. The *yud* again represents the coin. But this time, the coin is not of copper or silver, but it is existence itself. *Yud* has a numerical value of ten. Hence, it alludes to the Ten Sayings of Creation. Imagine yourself reaching out your hand represented by the *heh* to receive existence from Hashem. The greatest possible act of charity is G-d's giving existence to us. Are you ready to open your hand to receive and claim your existence?
8. Since we have no claim to existence, we cannot demand that G-d give it to us as our right. Therefore, G-d's giving us existence is pure tzedakah. Imagine Hashem's hand, which holds the existence He wishes to give us, as the letter *heh*. The *vav* is His arm reaching out to us, to give us existence. Finally, visualize the last *heh* of the Name as your own hand, which accepts your existence. G-d even gives us our own hand through which we receive existence from Him.
9. Visualize the four letters of the Tetragrammaton. Begin by contemplating the *yud*, which is the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, almost like a dot. Can you envision this *yud* as the initial point of creation? Imagine the *yud* as the first point of the Ten Sayings that brought creation into existence out of nothingness. Now imagine the first *heh* of the Name. This is the level of the Divine at which a vessel comes into existence to hold the abstract power of creation. Visualize how G-d is

holding the power of creation, in order to give it to us. The opening at the top of the *heh* is the channel from G-d, while the opening at its bottom is the channel to us below. Imagine the *heh* both as a five-fingered hand as a channel for the forces of creation.

10. Now contemplate the *vav*. Can you visualize G-d's power reaching out to us? Wanting to give? The most important letter is the final *heh*. This is our hand, into which we receive what Hashem is ready to give us. This final *heh* represents our ability to receive from G-d. The connection between the *vav* and the *heh* is extremely important. This is the connection between the giver and the receiver. To receive anything from G-d we must make this connection. Visualize the *vav* of Hashem's arm reaching out to give, so to speak, interlinked with the final *heh* representing our hand to receive. Whenever you are ready you may open your eyes and return to the room with a new resolve to be more meticulous about giving tzedakah.