

## ***Tzedakah and Each Person's Values***

### ***Shabbat Vayakheil – Shekalim 5782***

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Americans, including American Jews, do not like to be told what to do. Perhaps the ancient Israelites weren't all that different. In this week's Torah portion, Moses recapitulates an instruction from a few weeks ago, as the people begin to build the Tabernacle, their portable worship space in the wilderness: "This is what the Eternal has commanded: Take from among you gifts to the Eternal; everyone whose heart is so moved shall bring them..."<sup>i</sup>

The words seem self-contradictory. First, God commands: Collect donations! Then, in the same breath, we learn that only the willing must contribute. Which is it?

The Hebrew word most often translated as "charity" is *tzedakah*. However, as George Robinson teaches in *Essential Judaism*, that translation "is a misrepresentation of the concept. The Hebrew has its root in another word, *tzedek*/justice. In the Torah, we are strongly enjoined, '*Tzedek, Tzedek tirdof, Justice, justice thou shalt pursue.*'<sup>ii</sup> Rabbinical commentators have said that the repetition of the word justice is designed to underline the importance of the command. *Tzedakah* is not charity given out of *caritas*, [the root of the word, which suggests love of humankind]; it is given as an act of redress, as part of the process of seeking a just world."<sup>iii</sup>

In short, charitable giving is not optional in Judaism. Each of us is required to be God's partners in reversing the world's injustices, including poverty, by giving. As Robinson elaborates: "Everyone is required to give *tzedakah* according to [their] means. Even the poorest Jews, those who need help themselves, are expected to put aside something from what they receive in order to give *tzedakah*. But that poor Jew's tiny donation is as great as the large donation of the wealthiest."<sup>iv</sup>

So why does the Torah even mention receiving gifts from “everyone whose heart is so moved?” Writing in *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, Rabbi Marina Yergin shares the teaching of *Or HaChaim*, a commentator from eighteenth century Morocco: “When the Torah speaks of the “*kol n’div libo*, those whose hearts are so moved,” it defines the kind of person whose gift will be of the caliber that can merge with God’s intangible gift.”<sup>v</sup>

When rabbis talk about prayer, we often distinguish between *keva*, the fixed words of the prayer book, on the one hand; and *kavanah*, the intention with which prayers are offered, on the other. So, too, with *tzedakah*: The gift offered may be called the *keva*, the physical act of the contribution. Every donation to a worthy cause serves a positive purpose, just as the rote recitation of a prayer does. A giving spirit, though, contributing joyfully, elevates the gift. When we give out of obligation, we may achieve God’s will. When we give with intention, though, we become God’s partners.<sup>vi</sup>

Not long ago, a rabbinic colleague asked about a biblical verse that might be utilized as the slogan for an endowment campaign. Feeling snarky, I suggested a verse from Proverbs, “*Tzedakah* delivers from death.”<sup>vii</sup> I was joking, of course, because my theology does not imagine that a charitable gift can stave off death, which is exactly what the sages think the verse means. Rabbi Yergin asks us, though, to consider that our gifts may save the lives of **recipients**. She writes, “If we donate money or stand up for someone else’s rights, it does not necessarily impact our lives profoundly—the experience might, but the act itself may not. Conversely, the person who receives the donation or sees you standing by them is deeply affected. *Tzedakah* is how we connect to others. It is the act that makes us think about others first and connects us with them. And it is something that we need to remind ourselves to do continuously, not just occasionally, so that we can take ownership of our actions. We need to make *tzedakah* a habit, a practice, for all times.”<sup>viii</sup>

Tonight, for the very first time, I offered a blessing for a man in our congregation in celebration and affirmation of his gender transition, bestowing a new Hebrew name upon him. I suspect that for you, too, who called out *mazal tov* and sang *shehechianu*, the experience was a new one. For me, offering the blessing

was the opposite of uncomfortable. I have increasingly come to understand gender transition in recent years, and the blessing is found in our newly updated Reform Rabbi's Manual. I have looked forward to this moment, for more than one reason. I'm grateful for whatever positive impact the blessing has on Lee and his family. Just as important, Lee has given us a gift by being both brave and vulnerable enough to invite us to bless him publicly. And yes, I mean "us," as every person who responded *mazal tov* or sang *shehechianu* joined in the blessing. In so doing, we not only celebrated Lee, but we also made a statement to anyone in our midst, in person or on livestream, who may be silently questioning their gender identity. The hundreds of recipients of our Temple emails could see that Congregation B'nai Israel affirms every person's gender identity.

Most of us are cisgender—that is, we identify with the gender we were assigned at birth. Therefore, we fall into Rabbi Yergin's category of the ones who "gave *tzedakah*" tonight, by standing up for a cause that does not directly impact us individually.

We do know that young people struggling with their gender identity have a very high risk of suicide. Knowing that a house of worship affirms them, and receiving an implied but clear message that God and this religious community love them, could indeed, in the words of the proverb, "deliver from death."

You gave Lee, his family, and anybody else touched by this blessing a tremendous gift tonight, even if you simply sang *shehechianu* or called out *mazal tov* out of habit. As Rabbi Yergin suggests, if our hearts were in it, and I suspect they were, we partnered with God in the process.

Rabbi Yergin notes, "None of the contributions to the Tent of Meeting were monetary; they were in the form of materials and artistry. We tend to think of *tzedakah* only as money, but we can and should stretch our imaginations to think about other ways to support causes that are important to us."<sup>ix</sup> Tonight, we gave *tzedakah*, establishing justice through blessing, and we pray with the faith that God joins us in that gift.

Let all of our gifts be offered with purpose, with love, and with generosity. And may our *tzedakah* always be a blessing.

Amen.

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<sup>ii</sup> Exodus 35:4-5.

<sup>ii</sup> Deuteronomy 16:20.

<sup>iii</sup> George Robinson, “Tzedakah in the Jewish Tradition,” *MyJewishLearning*, [Tzedakah in the Jewish Tradition | My Jewish Learning](#).

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> Rabbi Marina Yergin, “Tzedakah: Putting Your Money Where Your Values Are,” *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, pp. 129-130.

<sup>vi</sup> Paraphrasing Rabbi Yergin.

<sup>vii</sup> Proverbs 10:2.

<sup>viii</sup> Yergin, p. 132.

<sup>ix</sup> Yergin, p. 133.