

Relations with the Hungry, Tzedaka & Welfare Reform

Tzedaka, the Jewish term for helping the poor, is often translated as "charity." However, the Hebrew root *tzedek* is more closely translated as "justice" or "fairness." What is the connection between giving to the poor and justice? Examine the following sources. Pay close attention to the *tone* of these quotations.

HELPING THE POOR

Sources from the Torah

According to these sources, how do you give to the poor and what is the reason for giving?

וּבְקִצְרוֹתְכֶם אֶת-קִצְרֵי אֲדָמְכֶם לֹא תִכְלֶה פֶּאֶת עֲדָה לְקִצֹר וְלִקְחֹת קִצְרֵיךָ לֹא תִלְקַח: י' וּכְרִמְךָ לֹא תֵעוֹלֵל וּפְרֹט כְּרִמְךָ לֹא תִלְקַח לְעַנִּי וְלְגֵר תֵּשׁוּב אֲתָם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather every grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and stranger; I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:9-10)

(Note: To glean is to gather the remains of the harvest left after the reapers collect)

כִּי תִקְצֹר קִצְרֵיךָ בְּעֵדָה וְשִׁכַּחַת עֹמֵר בְּעֵדָה לֹא תֵשׁוּב לְקַחְתּוֹ כִּגְר לְיָתוּם וְלְאִלְמָנָה יְהוָה לְמַעַן יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכֹל מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֶיךָ...

When you cut down your harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go again to fetch it; it shall be for the stranger, for the orphan, and for the widow; that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands... And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this thing. (Deuteronomy 24:19-22)

מִקְצֵה | עֲלֵשׁ שְׁנָיִם תּוֹצִיא אֶת-כָּל-מַעֲשֵׂר תְּבוּאָתְךָ בְּשָׁנָה הַהִיא וְהִנְחִיתָ בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ...

At the end of three years you shall bring forth all the tithe of your produce in that year, and shall lay it up inside your gates...and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are inside your gates, shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied; that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do. (Deuteronomy 19:28-29)

YOUR TORAH NAVIGATOR

1. What do the stranger, the orphan, and the widow all have in common?

2. What are the different reasons cited for why one should give/leave a portion to the poor? Why does the Torah say, "And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt"?

3. Note that the field owner is not obliged to distribute that which he is obliged give. Is this significant?

After answering this question, study the legal code of Maimonides brought on the following page. Maimonides was a 12th century philosopher and physician who wrote a code of Jewish law, the Mishna Torah, based on the Rabbinic oral tradition. How does his code reflect the Biblical passages we have just learned? How does it differ?

Maimonides, Mishna Torah, Laws of Contributions to the Poor, Chapter 10:7

ז 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 והחזקת בו גר ותושב וחי עמך כלומר החזק בו עד שלא יפול ויצטרך

There are eight levels of *Tzedaka*, each one higher than the other. The highest one of all is when one takes the hand of one from Israel and gives him a gift or a loan, or engages him in a partnership, or finds him work by which he can stand on his own and not require any charity. Thus it is written: "And you strengthened the stranger who lives with you." i.e. Strengthen him so he won't fall and need your help.

Following is a midrash (midrash is a literary technique by which the meaning of a Biblical verse is expanded and explained) based on a verse in Proverbs. How does this midrash enhance your understanding of the Biblical verses on the first page?

Bamidbar Rabba

מדרש רבה במדבר פרשה ה פסקה ב

אל תגזול דל כי דל הוא וגו' (משלי כב) אמרו רבותינו במה הכתוב מדבר אם הוא דל מהו גזול לו אלא לא דיבר אלא במתנות עניים שהוא חייב ליתן להם מן התורה לקט שכחה ופאה ומעשר עני והזהיר הקב"ה שלא יגזול אדם מהם מתנות הראויות ליתן להם כי דל הוא די לו עניותו לא דיו לעשיר שהוא עומד בריוח ועני בצער אלא אף גזול ממנו מה שנתן לו הקב"ה

"Do not rob the impoverished because he is impoverished" (Proverbs 22:22) Our rabbis taught: What is this Biblical verse referring to? If he is truly impoverished, of what can he be robbed? The verse must be speaking about gifts to the poor that one is obliged by Torah to give: gleanings, sheaves of wheat that are left behind, corners of the field, and the tithe of the poor man. The Holy One warns that a person should not rob the poor of the gifts that are due due to them.

"Because he is impoverished" means that it is enough that he suffers from poverty. Is it not enough for the rich man that he lives in comfort while the poor man is in distress; must he also rob the poor of what the Holy One has given him?

YOUR MIDRASH NAVIGATOR

1. Who owns the corners of a field?
2. According to the Midrash, from whom is the owner of the field stealing?