

Chagim uMoadim

— from the Masorti Movement



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Sympathy or Empathy? Our Perspective on Tzedakah

At this time of the year, we are preparing for the great Day of Judgment, when the Holy One, Blessed is He, examines us, our actions, our intentions and above all what we have done with His Creation. There are two sides to God's examination: His side and ours. Each and every one of us needs to engage in profound soul searching.

Rabbi Elazar teaches us: "Three things cancel the severe decree: prayer, *Tzedakah*, and Repentance" (Jerusalem Talmud, Taanit 65b / Halakhah 1). He learned this from what God said to King Solomon after finishing the building of the Temple: "if My people, upon whom My name is called, shall humble themselves and pray [this refers to prayer], shall seek My presence [this refers to *tzedakah*] and shall return from their evil ways [this refers to repentance], I will then hear from Heaven, forgiving their transgressions and healing their land [this refers to canceling the severe decree]" (2 Chronicles 7: 14).

Prayer, *tzedakah*, and repentance – three acts that profoundly affect our soul if we carry them out truly and sincerely. Of those three acts, I have found that *tzedakah* is most difficult, requiring a major change in a person's soul. Why is it so? Because it demands from us withdrawing from the center in an effort to truly understand reality from the other person's perspective.

You might say: "But *tzedakah* means giving money to people who need it. Nothing could be easier!" Just giving money is not *tzedakah* – it is charity. I'm giving someone else something that I think he lacks and something I can spare. Yes, it's a good thing to do – but this is not *tzedakah*. It doesn't cause me to change, it doesn't cause me to really understand the other person, to feel access his distress, to experience reality through his soul.

Our Sages taught us that real *tzedakah* means to give needy people what they lack: "If he has no clothes, clothe him; if he lacks housewares, buy them for him; if he or she haven't got married, help them to do so; even if he used to ride a horse with a servant running in front of him and then he became poor, buy him a horse to ride on and have a servant to run in front of him." (Maimonides, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 7:3).

Tzedakah means to restore dignity to those who have lost it; to restore trust to those who have lost their trust in others, as well as to restore to others the trust in that person; to help those with no jobs find their livelihood; to restore self-confidence to the weakened; to restore the smile to the sad; to help those who hold back their tears weep; to restore our capacity to compliment others.

We have to transcend ourselves; we have to stop focusing on ourselves, because tzedakah means helping others attain what THEY lack and not what WE think they need. The difference is enormous, since the needy person may be wealthy, poor, happy, or sad, someone who looks needy, as well as somebody who seems to be doing fine until we truly understand his and her soul.

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