

# Where does Charity Begin?

We are all being bombarded constantly with requests for money, at home, at work, on the streets, and on the internet. And all religions emphasize the importance of charity. But the real problem is one of the priorities. One cannot give in any significant way to all of the requests even if it may hurt to have to say no sometimes. The Talmud says that “ the poor of your city come before the poor elsewhere” and the same applies to one’s family. And yet at the same time the Talmud says you must support the non-Jewish poor to ensure good relations. *Darkei Shalom* is the technical term. And we must try to avoid ill will, *Mishum Eyvah*. And where do you draw the line?

This was brought home to me this week by a close friend who is a trustee of an important Charitable Fund in Israel. Most trustees want to spend money on specific Arab charities. Others on Jewish and or reconciliation projects.

The common word nowadays used for charity is *TSeDaKaH*. In the Torah, it stands for the general ethical value of righteousness. What we call charity nowadays was primarily fulfilled by agricultural impositions. Leviticus in chapters 19 and 23 legislates that landowners had to leave corners of their fields and vineyards to the poor at harvest time, produce forgotten or overlooked, and the gleanings to the poor. This expanded to cuttings that enabled the poor to create their vines and olive trees and become self-sufficient. The early biblical Book of Ruth gives a graphic description of how the tradition of the poor from everywhere coming into the fields at harvest time to gather food. The biblical concept of extending charity to others who were not citizens was remarkable for its openness. The other Biblical imperative was to lend without interest. To provide the capital to help the poor become self-sufficient.

Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) in his *Mishneh Torah*, details the laws of charity in Jewish Law. Here are some extracts. [https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh\\_Torah%2C\\_Gifts\\_to\\_the\\_Poor.4.16?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Gifts_to_the_Poor.4.16?lang=bi)

**Chapter 7: We must feed and clothe non-Jewish poor together with the non-Jewish poor** to ensure peaceful co-existence.

**Chapter 9:** In a city where there are Jews one is obliged to appoint Charity Commissioners, who are trustworthy to collect weekly and take from each person a fairly assessed amount to be distributed to the poor to make sure they have enough to eat. The commissioners should arrange for daily collections of food or money which are distributed each day called the Soup Kitchen.

**Chapter 10:** There are eight kinds of charity; each one is higher than the next. The highest is to support an Israelite who has fallen on hard times by giving him or her a present or loan, making him a partner, or finding him work so that you strengthen him to the point where he is no longer dependent on others and to do this **anonymously** ( *something that is all too rare*

nowadays J.R.). As it says, "You shall strengthen the stranger and the dweller in your midst and live with him. (*Leviticus 25.35.*)"

How are we to deal with those who panhandle or go knocking on doors? Maimonides says that we do support non-Jewish poor to encourage good relations but if someone goes begging door to door, we do not give large gifts. Instead, something small, so that we should never turn anyone away empty-handed (*Ibid 7:7*). A poor person who is one's relative receives priority over all others. The poor in one's household receive priority over the poor in one's city (*Maimonides Ibid 7:13*).

The other important element of communal charity was the Interest-Free Loan society that came to be known as the *GMACH* a word made up of the first Hebrew letters of the words *Gemilut Chesed*, Bestowing Kindness. The *GMACH* was a sort of Micro Bank whose role was to offer interest-free loans to encourage self-sufficiency. This is why the Talmud developed this alternative term *Gemilut Chesed*. It is not found in the Bible, although *Chesed* itself is mentioned a great deal and is superior to charity because it includes any act of kindness and may involve a poor person helping a wealthy one in some non-financial way. As the Mishna says, "These are the things that have no limit, leaving land for the poor to glean from, first fruits and pilgrimages (to Jerusalem), kindness (*Gemilut Chesed*), and studying Torah (*Mishnah Peah 1:1*)." And the Gemara adds "These are the things that a person benefits from in this world, but the real reward is in the World to Come, respect for one's parents, kindness, making peace between people but the study of Torah is greater than all (*TB Shabbat 127a*)."

And finally, is there a limit to how much one can give? The Talmud insists that we should not beggar ourselves by giving too much. The official halachic position is that one should give at least 10% after tax and a maximum of 20%. It is no mitzvah to beggar oneself even as a pious excess. Poverty is not a virtue. Elsewhere Maimonides in applying his rule of the golden mean (*The Eight Chapters*), argues that if one becomes too miserly, one should for a while give more charity than ever to try to correct the imbalance.

Coming back to my friend's situation, it is clear one's priority should be to Jews and only then to non-Jews. And the logic is that whereas there are only a few million Jews to call for help there are billions of members of other religious and political groups to help their causes. We should indeed contribute to non-Jewish charities but not to the same degree as our compatriots.