

YK-KOL NIDREI-5774 (2013):

Tzedakah: Justice, Righteousness, & Communal Responsibility

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The Defense of Marriage Act. This past summer, the Supreme Court of the United States voted (5-4) to strike down this 1996 law blocking federal recognition of gay marriage, declaring it to be unconstitutional. The court invalidated the Defense of Marriage Act, which denied gay married couples Social Security survivor benefits, immigration rights, family leave, and other benefits that are provided by the federal government to heterosexual couples. In coming to this decision, the 9 members of the Supreme Court wrestled with issues of equal access and discrimination. As in all court discussions and debates, the underlying issue was whether or not this particular act was **servicing the cause of justice or not**. That is why the members of the Supreme Court are called "**Justices**" and why the people who preside over court cases are known as "**judges**."

In *Parashat Shoftim* in the Book of Deuteronomy, which we just read in shul last month on the occasion of Scott Levine's Bar Mitzvah, God commanded the judges who were part of the Jewish court system in biblical times as follows, "**Justice, justice, you shall pursue.**" (Deut. 16:20)
"Tzedek, tzedek tirdof."

The Hebrew word for "**justice**" is "**tzedek**", which comes from the same root word as "*tzedakah*."

Ordinarily, when we hear the word "*tzedakah*," we think of this (HOLD UP TZEDAKAH BOX).

However, this word appears repeatedly in the *Machzor* that we use on the High Holidays & it does not always refer to money. For example, the word "zedakah" appears in the *Avinu Malkeynu* prayer, which we recited on RH, but which we will not be able to recite on YK until late tomorrow night after *Neilah* because *Avinu Malkeynu* is omitted on Shabbat. (Asking God to grant specific material requests, like those that are part of *Avinu Malkeynu*, would be inconsistent with the spirit of Shabbat.) But, last week, many of you joined me and Cantor Galfand in singing the last line of this powerful prayer,

"Aseh imanu Tzedakah va-Chesed v'hoshieynu".

With these words, as our lives hang in the balance, we beseech God to save us and to treat us with "zedakah" and lovingkindness.

Now, we don't mean that we want God put money in the *pushka*. The word "zedakah" does not mean "charity"; rather, it is connected to the Hebrew word "zedek", which means "**justice.**"

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During the High Holidays, we not only ask God to treat us with justice, but we also assure God that we will also follow pursue justice in our lives. In fact, the **Haftarah** that we will read tomorrow morning, from the **Book of Isaiah**, emphasizes the Jewish imperative to act in a just and righteous manner.

The **Prophet Isaiah** tells the People of Israel that it is hypocritical to fast on Yom Kippur and then continue to act in ways that are unjust. Isaiah says that our fasting is only pleasing to God if we share our bread with the hungry, open our homes to the poor, and provide clothing to those in need." Isaiah insists that righteous giving, "*tzedakah*," is necessary for a life of piety. It would be inaccurate to refer to someone as a pious or 'religious Jew' if s/he observes religious rituals but fails to observe the interpersonal moral and ethical obligations of our tradition.

The YK Haftarah highlights the Jewish imperative to act in accordance with the **values of justice and righteousness**.

These Jewish values are also part of the ***Unetaneh Tokef*** prayer.

During Musaf on RH & YK, we recite the following words,

***"U-teshuvah u-tefillah u-tzedakah maavirin et roa ha-g'zerah."***

"Repentance, prayer, & *tzedakah* help to mitigate the severity of the decree."

In many Machzors (including ours), the word "*tzedakah*" is often translated inaccurately as "charity." But the word "charity" comes from the Latin word "*caritas*", which embodies the concepts of "caring", "love" and "goodness". The word "charity" implies that we give money to others solely out of the goodness of our hearts./ While "*tzedakah*", like "charity", can also refer to the giving of money to charitable institutions, "*tzedakah*" is inextricably bound with the Jewish values of "justice" & "righteousness." So, a more accurate translation of the word "*tzedakah*" would be "**just and righteous giving**".

One of the ways in which we, as Jews, are expected to act righteously and justly is by giving of ourselves (in both financial and non-financial ways), not only out of the goodness of our hearts or because it will make us feel better about ourselves, but **also out of a sense of responsibility**: towards God, towards the Jewish community, and/or towards our fellow human beings.

Now, when many of us consider the organizations or causes toward which we will contribute *tzedakah*, **we often look outside of our immediate communities**. In this respect, perhaps we are influenced by the secular concept of "charity" in which people tend to give to charitable causes that are outside of the community. People often give charity to museums, medical research foundations, and other institutions with which they themselves are not directly affiliated. *Tzedakah* can include these and other worthy "**external**" organizations and causes.

**However**, "*tzedakah*" should not be limited to this type of "external" giving. *Tzedakah* is also about providing for worthy causes within your community, closer to home.

In the **Talmud (*Bava Metzia 71a*)**, **Rav Huna** teaches that there is a priority order list when it comes to deciding where to donate *tzedakah*. Building upon Rav Huna, **the Rambam (Maimonides)** teaches (in *Hilchot Matanot L'Aniyim 7:13*) that "The poor person who is in your family takes precedence over all others who are in need....and.....the poor person of your own town takes precedence over the poor of other towns."

These teachings indicate that that there are **concentric circles of priority** when it comes to giving *tzedakah*. If you consider yourself to be in the center of all of the circles, **the recipients who should be given *tzedakah* first are those who are in the concentric circle closest to the center**. As you move further and further away from the center, a lower level of priority should be assigned to each circle of potential *tzedakah* recipients.

The people and organizations that should be top on our list of *tzedakah* priorities are those that are closest to the center in terms of familial & geographical proximity.

**Geographical proximity** can be understood literally to mean individuals and institutions in Monmouth or Middlesex County, NJ. Just this past year, so many members of this synagogue felt the imperative to help victims of Hurricane Sandy whose homes were destroyed just a few miles from here, in **Union Beach**. "Geographical proximity" can also be understood in a spiritual sense to include *tzedakah* organizations in our spiritual home, the Land of **Israel**.

**Familial proximity** can be understood literally to mean the members of your biological or adoptive family: your parents, your children, etc.

You've heard of the expression: "**Charity begins at home.**" People often invoke this saying as a way of giving an excuse as to why they can't give *tzedakah*, as in, "We can't give *tzedakah* because then we won't be able to remodel our kitchen or go on an expensive family vacation this year."

But the expression, "Charity begins at home" can be understood in a different way. Based on Rav Huna's and Rambam's teachings about *tzedakah*, it means that we should **make it a top priority to give to causes within our extended family, the Jewish community.**

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The highest percentage of the *tzedakah* that we give should contribute towards **the creation and maintenance of our Jewish communal institutions**. By giving this type of “**internal**” *tzedakah*, we ensure the survival and continuity of Judaism.

One of the most meaningful ways to give *tzedakah* within your Jewish community is by contributing to your synagogue.

Perhaps you might not think of membership dues or additional contributions to Temple Beth Ahm as *tzedakah*..... But it is.

A **common misconception about synagogues** is that it is a “**fee for service**” organization, similar to a **gym**. When we join a gym for \$10 or \$20 or \$50 or \$100 per month, it only seems “worth it” if we go to the gym often enough to justify the expense. If we only use the cardio equipment once or twice a week but don’t go to the aerobics or yoga classes, then perhaps it doesn’t make sense to continue paying our gym membership fees.

Unfortunately, too many people apply this type of thinking to synagogues: **“Why should I pay \$2000 in dues and other contributions throughout the year if I only come to shul on the High Holidays and my kids aren’t in Religious School any more?”**

This type of thinking is understandable when we equate a shul to a gym, but synagogues are not gyms. Synagogues are not fee-for-service organizations. Giving money to your temple is not the equivalent of buying a gym membership.

For some people, the congregation is their community; paying membership dues and making additional donations throughout the year is an expression of commitment to this community, which is in one of the circles that is in closest proximity to the center.

For other people, the congregation is not their primary community, but they join a shul and make additional contributions **in order to support their local charitable communal institution and enable it to continue to survive and thrive.** Even though they do not 'use' the shul's 'services' (in a literal and figurative sense) as much as others do, they still join and give because it is good for their Jewish souls; they know it is the right and just thing to do. Because **giving to your synagogue is a form of *tzedakah*,** as well as an expression of commitment to your community.

But how are membership dues and other financial contributions to the synagogue considered to be *tzedakah*?

As a means of answering this question, please listen closely as I share five snapshots of the beneficiaries of this form of *tzedakah* within the synagogue community (To protect the identities of these individuals, I am using pseudonyms):

SNAPSHOT 1: Meet **Jason & Helen Grossberg**. **Jason** was **laid off from his job** a year ago and has been unable to find another job yet. **Helen** does not make enough money to support the household. During this period of financial hardship, Jason and Helen are unable to pay their full synagogue dues. This synagogue can still be there for Jason and Helen if all of the other members of this community pay what they can afford. While, in the past, Jason & Helen's dues and Kol Nidre pledges enabled other families in need to be members of this community, now Jason & Helen need to be on the receiving end. The donations that others make to the synagogue are an indirect form of *tzedakah* to Jason & Helen Grossberg... and to others like them in the community.

SNAPSHOT 2: Meet **Marion**. Marion is a **recently divorced woman** who is seeking a community in which she can meet other Jewish people. She feels isolated as a newly single person and wants to forge some new friendships in a Jewish context. She would also like to **provide her two young children with a Jewish education** but, until she finds a job outside of the home, she can't even afford to pay membership dues, let alone Religious School tuition. This synagogue can be there for Marion. But only if all of the members of the shul ensure Temple Beth Ahm's continued existence by contributing dues and making other donations according to their means.

SNAPSHOT 3: Meet **Paul**. After Paul's **daughter died**, he needed a minyan so that he could say Mourners' Kaddish. Although he used to only come to synagogue once a year, he now comes three times a week to say Kaddish. In addition to having service on Shabbat, his synagogue is available for minyan every weekday evening and on Thursday & Sunday mornings as well....and that is only possible because of the membership dues and other donations that all of the members of the shul make to this community.

SNAPSHOT 4: Meet **Kaye and Arthur Jochowitz**. Kaye and Arthur are **newlyweds** who recently moved to this area. Kaye is a **Jew-by-Choice**. She learned so much during her conversion process that her husband, Arthur, was inspired to learn as well. He doesn't remember much of what he learned as a young boy in Religious School and he is interested in deepening his knowledge and appreciation of Jewish holidays and customs. Arthur and Kaye would both like to **learn to feel more comfortable in a synagogue service**. They are looking forward to taking advantage of the **adult education** opportunities that this synagogue has to offer, including Learners' Minyan. And, God willing, one day when Kaye and Arthur have children, they hope to bring them to **Tot Shabbat** and **Mini Minyan** and, later on to **Religious School** and **Junior Congregation**. None of this would be possible without the *tzedakah* contributions by other synagogue members to the synagogue.

SNAPSHOT 5: Finally, meet **Eric**. Eric was recently diagnosed with a rare blood disease that is terminal. His doctors believe that **he will not live until next Yom Kippur**. Eric wants and needs a rabbi and a supportive Jewish community to be there for him and his family while he is dying. His kids will need to be taken to school and to doctor's appointments when he and his wife are unable to do his. His family will be in need of meals. He might want to talk about Jewish views of suffering and dying or he might need to express the various feelings he will experience during this difficult time. At times, he will need to express his sense of despair; at other times, he will need to express his hopes for the future of his family. At times, he might need guidance and support while preparing an ethical will; at other times, he will need a sounding board while expressing his feelings of anger. And, after Eric dies, his family will need the support of the rabbi and the rest of the synagogue community- during the funeral, shiva, and throughout the mourning period. Without membership dues and other *tzedakah* contributions to the synagogue, this synagogue might not be there for Eric and his family during this time of need

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In every shul community, **the membership dues and other donations of those who can afford to give more help to subsidize the dues of those who can't and those who are more needy.**

When you fulfill your financial obligations to the synagogue and when you make additional contributions to the synagogue throughout the year (according to your means), you are providing for the needs of **Jason & Helen, Marion, Paul, Kaye & Arthur, and Eric.....**and for so many others within the Temple Beth Ahm community.

When you give money to the synagogue, you are giving ***tzedakah*** to ensure that this spiritual community can exist, survive, continue on into the future, and thrive.

And when you give *tzedakah* to the synagogue, you are **expressing your commitment to be part of this community.**

As in any community, there are **responsibilities** as well as **rights** that go along with membership.

Some of you live in **condominiums or active adult communities**. Unlike those who live in single-family homes, those who live in condominiums or active adult communities own a piece of a larger property. When you buy one of these units, you become part of a community known as a condo or homeowners association. And as part of that community, you are not only responsible for your own individual dwelling area, but also for the communal spaces. You have a responsibility to the residential community as a whole.

The same is true of the sacred community known as a synagogue. When you join a synagogue, you are not just purchasing goods and services for yourself. You are becoming part of a community in which you are responsible not only for yourself, but also for others- others like **Jason & Helen, Marion, Paul, Kaye & Arthur, and Eric**.

By making financial contributions to the synagogue, you are fulfilling your responsibilities as a member of this community, just as our ancestors did in biblical times.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> book of the Torah, *B'Midbar* (Numbers), we read about the **census** that was taken during our ancestors' wanderings in the wilderness and we are given an exact count of the numbers of members of the community. According to **Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch**, the census provided the Israelite people with a valuable model of **communal responsibility**. As part of the census, each person was required to pay a half-shekel for the upkeep of the sanctuary. According to Rabbi Hirsch, this half-shekel contribution teaches us that **a Jew is only counted as belonging [to the people] by doing something, contributing something towards the community**. In biblical times, payment of the half-shekel was the way by which each member of *Bnai Yisrael* demonstrated support for the community.

In today's day and age, **Temple Beth Ahm counts upon each and every one of you each for your support.** We are only considered part of the 'census' (part of those who "count") when we look beyond our own individual needs and do something to ensure the existence of and continued support of our sacred synagogue community.

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During this High Holidays season, as we sit alongside each in the safe sacred space of our synagogue, praying together as a community, the **communal** aspect of Jewish life becomes salient.

During these holidays, as we recite the words in the Machzor, "*U-teshuvah u-tefillah u-tzedakah maavirin et roa ha-g'zerah*", we highlight the Jewish value of **tzedakah**.

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•So, consider giving as much as you can this year, knowing that in many other religious organizations, people are expected to contribute a tithing, a full 10% of their incomes. We are not asking you to give that much, just as much as you think you can afford without sacrificing the welfare of your family.

•Consider giving as much as you can to this synagogue, because it's your **responsibility** as a member of this **community** or as a relative of a TBA member to look beyond your own individual needs and to keep this community going and thriving

•Consider giving as much as you can, within your means, to help sustain this **community** because, as the Hebrew word "**tzedakah**" implies, this giving is an act of **justice & righteousness**.

**Give according to your means, with all of your heart.**

Why? because it's **the just & right thing to do.**

I'd like to conclude with a **prayer by Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav**

(I'll say the words one line at a time

& ask that you repeat the words after me.)

**May God help me become a giver.**

Help me give and go on giving.

God, you've called upon us to [fulfill the communal responsibility of giving]

*tzedakah.*

Show me how.

Show me how to live with a pure heart.

An open heart.

[A giving heart.]

With a heart filled with joy.

Lead me to those who are truly deserving.

Because **giving is so holy an act.**