



Charity

Scholars have long disagreed about what distinguishes human beings from the rest of the animal world. Some have argued that it is man's intelligence and use of language that distinguishes him; hence the term *Homo Sapiens*. Others have maintained that it is the fact that he uses tools that makes man distinct from other living creatures; hence, the term *Homo Faber*. There have even been those who have put forward the opinion that man alone of all the rest of the animal species engages in

play; hence, the term *Homo Ludens*.

This disagreement is the basis for my personal practice of stimulating debate by asking groups with whom I interact the question, "What distinguishes the Jewish people? What makes us unique and different from other human groups?"

Here too, a number of opinions abound. There are those who will instinctively respond, "We are the people of the Book." By this many mean that we are the people who follow the ultimate book, the Bible. Others simply mean that we are a bookish people, tending to be intellectually oriented, and certainly read a lot more than most other cultures.

Another response that I have heard when I pose the question about what makes the Jewish people distinct, is that we alone among other faith communities think of ourselves as a family, as a *mishpacha*. I always find this response especially gratifying, because it recognizes a feature of our people of which we can all be proud.

There is another answer which I sometimes encounter, and that is that the Jewish people are a giving people, that it is our generosity that distinguishes us from others, that charity or *tzedakah* is our highest value. This point of view is emphatically expressed, with a degree of irony, in a passage in the Tractate *Shekalim* of the Jerusalem Talmud which reads:

"Rabbi Abba ben Acha said: One can never fully understand the character of this nation. When they are asked to contribute to the

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Golden Calf, they give. When they are asked to contribute to the Holy Tabernacle, they give.”

This can be seen as an indication of indiscriminate giving, and the Talmud emphasizes that it reflects a deeper tendency to be responsive to all appeals for help, often without paying sufficient attention to the merits of the cause.

The first indication of the charitable instincts of our people is to be found in this week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Terumah* (*Exodus 25:1-27:19*). In the very first verses of this *parsha*, the Almighty instructs Moses to gather gifts from the people in order to construct the sanctuary in which He is to dwell. He goes so far as to itemize the materials which will be necessary. The list begins with gold and silver and extends to spices and incense and precious gems.

The people respond willingly and generously, and establish a precedent of charitable giving for all future Jewish generations. Indeed, the Talmud in the passage just referenced, insists that the gifts of gold donated to the Holy Tabernacle were intended to atone for the gifts of gold which were molten into what became the Golden Calf.

This year, and in most calendar years, the Torah portion of *Terumah* is read about a week prior to the holiday of Purim. This holiday too is all about giving. The very celebration of this joyous day consists, as we will read in the book of Esther, of “sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor.” (*Esther 9:22*)

There is an interesting contrast, however, between the practice of giving on the holiday of Purim and the proper strategy for giving during the rest of the year. On Purim we must not prioritize our gifts. We give to “whomever extends his hand.” We are permitted to be indiscriminate in our giving, without judging

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as to who is more needy and who is less so.

But when it comes to the distribution of charity during the rest of the year we are instructed to be far more careful about our practices of giving. It might indeed be our ethnic tendency, as the passage in the Jerusalem Talmud above suggests, to give to idolatrous causes as freely as we give to sacred ones. But we must realize that that tendency is typically based on impulse, on the emotions of the moment, whereas proper charitable giving requires planning and intelligent thought.

These days there are numerous causes which beg for our resources. I hasten to add that few, if any, of them are “idolatrous.” Quite the contrary, most of them are legitimate and even important. But charitable giving, according to our rabbis, requires triage; that is, careful determination of which causes have priority. The rabbis even have set down rules for how to make that determination.

The importance of realizing that not all charitable causes are of equal merit is well illustrated by a homiletic insight which I found in a book written by my respected colleague, Rabbi Daniel Feldman. The book is entitled *Divine Footsteps: Chesed and the Jewish Soul*. I quote:

“The Vilna Gaon...homiletically

understood the verse, ‘thou shall not...close your hand against your destitute brother’ (*Deuteronomy 15:7*), as an instruction about the evaluative responsibility contained within the *tzedakah* imperative. When our hand is closed in a fist, all fingers appear to be the same size. However, when the hand is open, it becomes clear that the fingers are all of different length...Appropriate giving will always require a judgment call...”

We are often moved by appeals which tug at our heartstrings and which prompt us to what some have called “emotional giving.” But all of us, no matter how wealthy we are as individuals, and no matter how strong our finances are as organizations, have limited resources. We must attempt, although we can never be absolutely certain that our judgments are correct, to discern the priorities of the moment, and to distinguish between urgent overriding needs and causes which, despite their may great merit, must be lower down on our list of priorities, and indeed which may, because of the paucity of our resources, have to be eliminated from that list entirely.

These are difficult decisions, no doubt, but necessary ones. Proper charity must be given with an open hand and with an open heart. But it must also be given with an open mind. ■

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