



Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot (5:16): Supreme Tzedaka

“There are four types of givers of tzedaka:...he who gives and wishes others to give is a pious person...”
(Pirkei Avot 5:16)

EXEMPLARY GIVING

The Talmud (Berachot 58b) tells the story of two rabbis who, when walking past the former residence of the great sage, Rav Chana bar Chanilai, reminisced about the extraordinary charity which was performed in that home: “Sixty bakers baked breads day and night for the needy; Rav Chana bar Chanilai kept his wallet with him at all times so that he need not cause a beggar to wait unnecessarily; there were four entrances made available for those in need to enter, and in times of desperate need, wheat and barley would be placed outside the home so even those who were not impoverished could take without embarrassment.

Rav Kook exquisitely suggested that the saintly practices of the great sage illustrate four ways one is to endeavor to give tzedaka in the most exemplary fashion.

The description of sixty bakers baking bread represents that the abundant and plentiful gifts that God bestows on us should be lovingly shared with others. Providing for others with an open heart and giving to others

in abundance is emblematic of the overflowing kindness of a Jewish heart.

Second, Rabbi Chanilai was mindful to always have his wallet in close proximity so that he could immediately give charity to others. Tzedaka must also be given with extreme sensitivity so that the recipient does not suffer any loss of dignity. When the recipient is forced to wait, or worse, to ask a second or a third time, he suffers further embarrassment.

Rav Kook offered a novel interpretation to the description of the Rabbi Chanilai's home being “open to all four directions.” Often people are particular on judging whether the organization or individual that he is giving to aligns with their own viewpoint. One who sincerely and wholeheartedly gives tzedaka is much less concerned about others' specific viewpoints. A person in need is a person in need. The righteous give tzedaka to a wide variety of people with a generous heart no matter which “direction” they come from or viewpoint they maintain.

Finally, one who gives tzedaka in the most elevated fashion does not seek recognition. Making it possible for people to receive the donation without the giver being present or known is an unadulterated act of righteousness. In the Talmudic passage above, Rabbi Chanilai placed the “wheat and barley

outside” - which is emblematic of giving with the purest of intent and not in order to bolster one’s own personal fame or glory.

THE SCHOOL CHILDREN’S

GIMEL AND DALET

Another stunning Talmudic passage teaches the lesson of giving tzedaka with sensitivity and care. In this teaching, it is the very shape of the Hebrew letters which convey this essential lesson.

The Talmud reports that young school children, stepping out of their school building, offered their interpretation of the message contained in the shapes of the letters gimel and dalet and say that they represent the relationship between the giver and the poor person. The letter gimel is similar to the term gomel which means to give, and the dalet is similar to the word dal (poor), representing the impoverished. The shape of the gimel, say the children, looks similar to a stick figure of a person with two legs. The gimel, with its front leg extended, is pursuing the dalet, the poor person and seizing the opportunity to give tzedaka. (Shabbat 104a)

Additionally, say the youngsters: “Why does the dalet turn its face away from the gimel? [To show that the giver] should give [the poor person] clandestinely, so that [the poor person] will not be ashamed of him.” Rav Kook comments: “The giver is obligated to protect the basic element of the recipient’s dignity in order not to debase the nobility of engaging in the mitzvah of giving charity...and the effort must be great.” (Ain Aya, Shabbat, Vol. 2, Chapter 12, #16).

It is noteworthy that this lesson, emphasizing the need to be compassionate and sensitive to the feelings of the impoverished, is specifically being articulated by school-children. They instinctively perceived these lessons

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simply by noting the unique forms of certain Hebrew letters.

Perhaps the Talmud is emphasizing that these truths are basic to the human condition. Even a child at a young age recognizes these values to be foundational and true. Thus the Talmud is suggesting that when it comes to helping others it would be wise for us to return to the innocent child-like response of natural sensitivity to the suffering of another person.

“THE NECKLACE WAS MEANT FOR YOU”

Acts of tzedaka come in many forms. The following moving episode tells the story of Rav Aryeh Levin’s pious wife and an act of tzedaka directed toward her beloved sister; how her act of exquisite selfishness ensured that peace and love would continually flourish in the family.

Rav Aryeh’s wife was Tzipora Chana

Shapira, daughter of Rav Dovid Shapira, the eminent rav of Kovno, and sister of Rebbetzin Malka Frank, wife of Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank, the eminent rav of Yerushalayim. When Tzipora Chana left for her aliyah to Eretz Yisrael her father gifted her a precious pearl necklace which belonged to her mother who had passed away at a relatively young age. He felt that this could also be helpful to her if she was ever desperate for funds when facing the adversities of her new life in Palestine.

When she met her sister in Jerusalem for the first time, her sister, Malka Frank, inquired if she knew the whereabouts of their mother's precious pearl necklace. She expressed her hope that she would be able to have at least one item which could be inherited as a keepsake and hold on to a tangible memorial from her mother.

Before she even finished speaking, Tzipora Chana presented her sister with the pearl necklace, and, with fullness of heart said, "Our father actually sent the necklace with me in order to give it to you."

Rav Simcha Shlomo Levin, Rav Aryeh and Tzipora Chana's son, would later report that he can testify to the fact that his mother, the righteous Tzipora Chana, never for a moment regretted giving her sister the inner-joy and satisfaction of owning and frequently wearing her mother's pearls. (Derech Avot, Sternberg, pp. 272-273).

THE REBBETZIN'S BURIAL PLACE

Rav Aryeh Levin often made reference to the remarkable conduct of the Jewish people's matriarch, Rachel. She selflessly allowed her sister to take her place and marry her beloved Yaakov, not knowing what the future would hold. In a word, our mother Rachel heroically relinquished her own hopes and dreams in order to protect the honor and dignity of her older sister. Rav Aryeh suggested that it is for this reason that

praying at her burial place - *Kever Rachel* - has special significance. She personified concern with the needs of others and placing those who are suffering first and foremost.

Rav Aryeh beautifully added that for this reason he felt that it is especially propitious to pray at the burial place of his wife, Rebbetzin Tzipora Chana. She was a holy woman because she personified the character trait of relinquishing was rightfully hers for the sake of others who would benefit. Her first concern was that others be alleviated of their pain and help them feel more joy and blessing in their lives. (Ibid.) ■



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