TO SUBSCRIBE:
CALL (877) 568-SHMA
ONLINE www.shma.com
EMAIL shma@cambeywest.com

42/683 October 2011/Cheshvan 5772



A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

Inside Tzedakah
Daniel S. Nevins Rebranding <i>Tzedakah</i> : From Charity to Sacred Spending 1
Larry S. Moses Tzedakah & Philanthropy: Rethinking American Jewish Giving 3
Lucy Bernholz The New Social Economy: A Broader Mix of Players 4
Don Abramson Creating a <i>Tzedakah</i> Standard 5
Charlene Seidle In Relation to the Collective 6
Rachel Levenson Shattering Stereotypes: The Newest Philanthropists 7
Yoni Gordis, Jessica Liebowitz, Will Schneider, Seth Cohen For Every Idea, a Nonprofit? A Roundtable on Innovation 8
Shawn Landres From Giving to Impact Investing 10
William Foster & Toby Rubin How Big? How Great? . 12 Discussion Guide 14
Amy Rabbino Helping Funders Make Good Decisions 15
Noam Zion The Guide for the Perplexed Donor: Tzedakah as Jewish Identity 16
Jennie Rosenn,

Shelley Hébert, Sherri Morr, & Brett Caplan

Dan Medwin

NiSh'ma 18

Sh'ma Ethics20

hile the terms "philanthropy" and "tzedakah" are sometimes used interchangeably, this issue of Sh'ma focuses a sharp lens on distinguishing one concept from the other. Larry Moses outlines the ways in which tzedakah is an obligation rooted in a basic tenet of doing justice and addressing the needs of the poor. Several writers respond to his essay and explore whether philanthropic giving should be seen as broader and more discretionary. Has the emergence of philanthropy — especially as a portal into Jewish life — created a "gentrified" tzedakah that focuses charitable giving in ways that are not benefitting those in need of such essentials as shelter, food, and warmth?

The last decades have witnessed an explosion of innovative programs and services that have drawn new funders into the practice of serious Jewish giving. This month's Roundtable, as well as the conversation between Toby Rubin and William Foster, explore how sustainable and scalable such projects are. Daniel Nevins and Don Abramson suggest that we, as Jews, ought to embrace a certain "standard of giving" — similar to that of biblical tithing.

Does the practice of giving build character? Does it sensitize us to weigh our own needs while holding in front of our eyes the needs of others? Many philanthropists comment on the transformative nature of giving. We hope this issue will help to redefine the communal conversation about *tzedakah* and philanthropy.

—Susan Berrin, Editor-in-Chief

Rebranding *Tzedakah:*From Charity to Sacred Spending

DANIEL S. NEVINS

The third paragraph of birkat hamazon, the prayer after eating, presents an odd conflation of concerns. Opening with a petition for divine mercy toward Israel, its people, capital, temple, and monarchy, the prayer veers into an anxious plea to escape material dependence on other mortals: "Do not make us

dependent upon the gifts of people, nor on their loans, but only on Your full, bountiful, and capacious hand, that we not be ashamed or humiliated forever." Without even the slightest bridging attempt, the prayer then re-

turns to its initial theme, asking that God rebuild the holy city of Jerusalem speedily in our day. What is the middle passage about financial insecurity doing in a prayer about Jerusalem?

It is unclear when this section was added. It is not mentioned in the Talmud's brief discussion of the origins of *birkat hamazon* (*Brakhot* 48b) and it appears for the first time in the medieval *Mahzor Vitri* (83). But this passage's anxiety about economic dependence on

others is consistent with earlier rabbinic themes. Historian Seth Schwartz argues in *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society?* that the rabbis created a countercultural ideal in rejecting Roman practices of patronage, honor, and giftgiving (in the Greek, 'euergia'). Rather, they held up the Torah's ideal of dependence on God

Part of our failure is cultural. We have internalized Western concepts of individual agency and patronage, wherever they lead, and largely abandoned the Jewish ideal of obligation.

alone, and viewed poverty relief as a divine commandment (mitzvah), not as a social favor for which one was owed gratitude.

Jewish reality, however, was and has remained that *tzedakah* is more commonly viewed as a voluntary act of generosity and kindness for which one is due gratitude and honor. The ancient rabbis had to accommodate this internalization of "Mediterranean" values within the Jewish community while still offering symbolic



resistance. Perhaps this can explain the interpolation of the theme of economic independence in the prayer for Jerusalem. Redemption will be signaled not only by the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, but also by the reordering of society such that no person will be dependent upon the gifts and loans of another, but only upon God's bountiful hand.

Tzedakah today exists in a fallen state much more akin to "charity" than to the obligatory actions of righteousness idealized in rabbinic sources. We have created a philanthropic culture that lavishes honor upon donors who have the "vision to invest" in chosen initiatives. Meanwhile, ordinary communal needs such as poverty relief, elder care, and subsidized Jewish education suffer from benign neglect.

Part of our failure is cultural. We have internalized Western concepts of individual agency and patronage, wherever they lead, and largely abandoned the Jewish ideal of obligation. But other aspects of the failure are our inability to develop a coherent sense of priorities in Jewish spending and our graduated expectations of giving based upon financial capacity. Even as they seek to accommodate the demands of "donor relations," Jewish professionals should define and project a countercultural ideal of tzedakah not as charity, but as the responsible and righteous use of resources.

One way to do this is to reclaim ancient categories that align with a broad set of Jewish obligations. This is not a list of charities, but of sacred spending that is mandatory for a religious Jew.

- Peah, shikhecha v'leket emergency food relief for the local, regional, and global poor. This is a mitzvah that the rabbis say has no limit, yet they advise that at least 1.5 percent to 2.5 percent of income from field crops be surrendered to the poor. So, too, should contemporary wage earners give a tangible amount to support the hungry and vulnerable in their community and around the world. From the behavior of Boaz toward the Moabite woman Ruth, we see that such gifts are not limited to the Jewish poor.
- *Terumah u'ma'aser* a tithe (10 percent) for religious services. In ancient times, this supported the landless priests and Levites who ran the Temple, taught Torah, and represented the community. Today, we could apply these funds to the religious organizations needed by the Jewish community: synagogues, day schools, seminaries, and

- summer camps, which sustain and deepen Jewish identity.
- Ma'aser Sheni a second tithe amounting to 9 percent, most of which was reserved for a family pilgrimage fund, while the rest was distributed to the local poor. In our day, such money could be allocated to a family's own ritual expenses (sukkah, seder, Israel travel, synagogue dues, etc.) and to increase donations to ameliorate the poverty of elderly, ill, disabled, and isolated individuals.
- Machazit Ha-Shekel a final flat poll tax whose purpose is truly communal in that it supports central welfare organizations that serve the entire Jewish people.

It is possible to create a tzedakah spreadsheet akin to the Internal Revenue Service's Form 1040 — an attempt is already in progress — but the goal should not be to create a mechanistic approach to giving. People with greater resources can usually afford to spend a higher percentage of income on such sacred causes. Yet every family should use these categories to identify its Jewish obligations — to fund poverty relief, religious services, communal structures, and their own Jewish experiences. Families with school-age children may need to allocate more to Jewish education, but even they must dedicate funds to poverty relief. Families without dependent children should not exempt themselves from supporting Jewish education, even if their philanthropic interests lie elsewhere. Donors who are secular should be encouraged to spend time and money enriching their own Jewish lives.

No one wants to feel dependent upon charity; our goal must be to create a Jewish community that systematically addresses individual and collective needs, thus binding us together. Such a community would minimize shame and maximize dignity; such a community would be the very image of redemption.



Sign up now at shma.com

Rabbi Daniel S. Nevins is the Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and dean of the Division of Religious Leadership at the Jewish Theological Seminary.