

Proportions of Giving: A Tiresome Argument

Posted At : February 2, 2011 12:00 PM | Posted By : Seth Chalmer

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eJewish Philanthropy is **highlighting selections** from The Peoplehood Papers #6 (**available in full** via the Nadav Fund site), dedicated to the tension between the principles of charity toward the stranger and charity to help one's own. A number of articles appear, with some arguing that the Jewish community must put Jewish needs first, and others arguing that Jews must look to the needs of all people.

This is an argument we have seen before. I think immediately of an exchange last year between **Prof. Jack Wertheimer**, who argued that Jews give enough to nonsectarian causes and should spend more enhancing Jewish knowledge and engagement, and **Rabbi Jill Jacobs**, who argued that meeting Jewish needs and meeting other people's needs is not a zero-sum game.

This argument is tiresome for two reasons. First, each side argues mainly against straw-man versions of the other. Listening to the more particularist voices, one might conclude that all outward-directed Jewish philanthropy is undertaken by people and organizations completely uninterested in meeting Jewish needs. On the other hand, listening to the more universalist voices, one would think that anyone who believes in *prioritizing* Jewish needs wants actually to *abandon* non-Jewish needs completely. In fact, thank God, neither of these characterizations is true. This is an unnecessary spat between two groups of good people, both of which are full of integrity and compassion. People on both sides of this debate actually agree that Jews should help both Jews and non-Jews.

The only substantive difference over which to bicker is the proportion: should 90% of our funds go to help Jews and 10% to help non-Jews? Or vice-versa? Or 50-50? Maybe we should make a complex actuarial formula that will tell us, conclusively, that 43.79% of communal funds should go to helping our fellow Jews...

And that brings us to the second reason this argument is tiresome: why are we so picky about the proportion? Aren't there better uses for our time and energy than sniping at one another about proportions of giving? We could, for example, spend that time actually helping someone instead. Any time a donor or volunteer or organization steps up to make a difference, we shouldn't wag our fingers at them because they are [too / insufficiently] insular and should be helping [Jews / non-Jews]; we should congratulate them with a big "yasher koach" for doing something at all.

If I may wax ironic for a moment: we have been blessed with an abundance of need. There is a great mass of physical and spiritual poverty; there is great need for both religious and sociopolitical education. If we are ever faced with the terrifying conundrum of not enough needs to be met, then we can indulge ourselves in frittering away our time arguing about the "proper" proportions.

Meanwhile, in the face of such a voluminous and diverse pool of needs, let everyone give where her/his inclinations tend, and it will all be to the credit side of the moral ledger. When our inclinations differ, what of it? The organization which focuses on Jews out of familial love, and the organization which focuses on people who do not happen to be Jewish out of universal love, are both doing essentially the same thing: *helping people*. When we keep that in mind, the differences ought to take on a

secondary importance, at most.