

## Reconstructing Judaism New York Day of Learning January 26, 2020

### Scenario 1:

You are walking down the street and see a man and a woman sitting on a blanket with a sign that reads: Homeless, please help. You have seen them before and you sometimes give them money or food. What do you do today?

### Texts:

#### Deuteronomy 15:7-8

כִּי־יְהִי־בְךָ אֶבְיוֹן מֵאֶחָיִךְ בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־הוּא אֶלֶיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ  
לֹא תִאֲמָץ אֶת־לִבְּךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת־יָדְךָ מֵאֶחָיִךְ הָאֶבְיוֹן: כִּי־פִתַח תִּפְתַּח  
אֶת־יָדְךָ לוֹ וְהֶעֱבַט תִּעְבִּיטֵנוּ דִּי מִחֲסָרוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִחְסַר לוֹ:

When there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the Eternal your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kin. Rather, you must open your hand and lend them sufficient for whatever they need.

#### Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor 7:2

And one who sees a poor person asking but raises their eyes from them and does not give them charity, has violated a negative commandment, as it says, "You shall not harden your heart, and you shall not close your hand from your needy kin."

**Sifrei Re'ey 116:** even a hundred times

#### Rambam on Avot 3:15

When a person gives to an appropriate person one thousand gold pieces at once, he would not be considered at the level of generosity in this one large action as someone who gave one thousand gold coins (one at a time) one thousand times and through each coin was generous, because this multiplies the act of generosity one thousand times and [the trait of generosity] is strengthened in this person, while the other one only had his spirit raised to the awareness to do good once and then stopped.

### **Rabbi Chayim Halberstam of Sanz (1793-1876)**

Rabbi Chayim of Tsanz had this to say about fraudulent charity collectors: "The merit of charity is so great that I am happy to give to 100 beggars even if only one might actually be needy. Some people, however, act as if they are exempt from giving charity to 100 beggars in the event that one might be a fraud."

### **Rabbi Israel Salanter (1809-1883)**

A person should be more concerned with spiritual matters than with material matters, but another person's material welfare is his own spiritual concern.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. What are your feelings when confronted by people asking for money? How do you decide whether to give or not? How does your choice make you feel?
2. What does the Maimonides text imply about the purpose of tzedakah?
3. How important to you is the long-term efficacy of your contribution?
4. How do you frame for yourself "giving" vs. "helping"?

## Scenario 2:

There is a proposal to build affordable housing in your community. A member of your synagogue's Social Action Committee wants the synagogue to sign on to a petition in support. Some members of the Board are opposed.

### Talmud Bavli Baba Metzia 62a

שנים שהיו מהלכין בדרך וביד אחד מהן קיתון של מים אם שותין שניהם מתים ואם שותה אחד מהן מגיע לישוב דרש בן פטורא מוטב שישתו שניהם וימותו ואל יראה אחד מהם במיתתו של חבירו עד שבא ר' עקיבא ולימד וחי אחיך עמך חיך קודמים לחיי חבירך

Two people were walking on a path and one had a jug of water. If both drink, both will die, but if only one of them drinks, that one will reach a settled area. Ben Petora taught: It is preferable that both of them drink and die, and let neither one of them see the death of the other. [This was the accepted opinion] until Rabbi Akiva came and taught that the verse states: "And your kin shall live *with* you, (Leviticus 25.36)" indicating that your life takes precedence over the life of your companion.

### Talmud Bavli Baba Batra 7b

מ' למימרא דבית שער מעליותא היא והא ההוא חסידא דהוה רגיל אליהו דהוה משתעי בהדיה עבד בית שער ותו לא משתעי בהדיה

Is this to say that making a gatehouse is beneficial? But wasn't there that pious man, with whom the prophet Elijah was accustomed to speak, who built a gatehouse, and afterward Elijah did not speak with him again?

**Rashi:** The gate house blocks out the sound...The voices of the poor screaming out cannot be heard.

### Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor 9:1, 3

Any city in which there is a Jewish community is obligated to raise up collectors of tzedakah, people who are well-known and trustworthy, to go door-to-door among the people from Sabbath eve to Sabbath eve and to take from each and every one what is appropriate for them to give.

[The amount] should be a set and clear matter for each person. They also distribute the money from Sabbath eve to Sabbath eve and give to each and every poor person enough food to last them for seven days. This method is called the kupah [the "coffer" for the charity fund].....Never have we seen or heard of a Jewish community that does not have a kupah....

**Dr. Meir Tamari, (1927-), South African-Israeli economist, ethicist**

Some years ago the mayor of Jerusalem proposed law outlawing begging in the streets of Jerusalem, as this was a bother and a nuisance to passers-by. The city council dismissed it, among other reasons, on account of the traditional Jewish attitude to begging....I never really understood why begging should be allowed until my first visit to New York in the early 1960s. My work there was primarily concentrated in the financial district, and for some time there was something there that bothered me without my knowing exactly what it was. Finally, it dawned on me: there were no beggars, no blind men, and no poor old men or women on Wall Street sidewalks or corners. It is true that the argument for the Jerusalem proposal was based on the assumption that society will take care of these people in a more dignified and efficient way. Irrespective of whether in actual fact this is so, there is an additional reason behind such legislation: viz., to prevent the sorrows and misery of the poor and weak from being thrust out of the everyday consciousness of the average person. In the Israeli religious kibbutz movement, for example, we found in the 1950s that even though the kibbutz gave tzedakah as it was supposed to, our children had grown up completely unaware of the reality of poverty and suffering - an ignorance that has far-reaching effects on the moral and ethical development of a person.

**Questions for discussion:**

1. How do you balance your needs, your self-interest against communal needs? How do you decide what your self-interest is?
2. What's the problem with a gatehouse?

3. Jewish communities used to have obligatory tzedakah collection to meet the needs of the community. How do we understand communal responsibility today? How should we support those in need when not everyone gives?
  
4. Why would it be important for a community to be diverse racially, socio-economically, in regard to ability, etc.? Do you consider spiritual development along with other concerns?