



How Should We Respond to Human Need?

A Text Study on Three Different Responses
Attributed to Rabbi Yonah
by Rabbi Toba Spitzer and Rabbi Shai Gluskin¹

אֲשֶׁרִי מִשְׁכִּיל אֶל-דָּל

Happy is the one who is *maskil* to the person in need... (Psalms 41:2)

[*Maskil*: from a root meaning to be prudent, look at, give attention to, have insight or understanding.]

In the time when Rabbi Yonah taught on this verse, the conventional wisdom of what it meant was most likely: “Happy is the one who **gives** to the person in need.” The meaning of the verb *maskil* in this sentence is not clear, however. This ambiguity provides an opportunity for Rabbi Yonah to teach something different about the nature of our relationship to a person or people in need.

We don’t know whether the three teachings below, all attributed to Rabbi Yonah and each from a different source, reflect three distinct ideas from Rabbi Yonah or three differing transmissions of the same teaching.

TEXT #1:

אמר רבי יונה “אשרי נותן לדל” אין כתיב כאן אלא “אשרי משכיל אל דל” והוא שמסתכל במצוה היאך לעשותה.

Rabbi Yonah said: “Happy is the one who gives to the person in need” is not what the verse says, but rather, “Happy is the one who is *maskil* to the person in need,” meaning, one must examine/look into the mitzvah in order to know how to do it. (Jerusalem Talmud, Peah 8:8 [3:33a])

Questions:

- What is the distinction Rabbi Yonah is making between giving to a person (or people) in need, and “examining the mitzvah”?

¹ Study text developed by Rabbis Toba Spitzer and Shai Gluskin, based upon a teaching and translations by Danny Siegel of the Ziv Tzedekah Fund and Rabbi David Rosenn of AVODAH

- What kinds of things beyond or different than “giving” might be implied by this kind of “looking into” the situation?

TEXT #2:

“אשרי משכיל אל דל” אמר ר, יונה. אשרי משכיל ונותן אל דל.
מהו משכיל? שמסתכל וחושב עליו היאך להחיותו.

“Happy is the one who is *maskil* to the person in need.” Rabbi Yonah said: Happy is the one who is *maskil* **and** gives to the person in need. What does *maskil* mean [in this case]? It is the one who pays close attention to the poor person [and then] considers how to bring him [the poor person] to life. (Midrash Rabbah on Psalms 41:2)

Questions:

- In this text, the word for giving life is used (*lehakhiyoto*). This might refer to life itself, and/or livelihood. What are the different aspects of allowing someone to “live” that Rabbi Yonah might be referring to here?
- What does this statement imply about the kinds of action we should take in response to poverty or other kinds of hardship?
- How might this text relate to the pitfalls that so often plague relief operations?

TEXT #3:

אמר ר, יונה “אשרי נותן אל דל” אין כתיב אלא “אשרי
משכיל אל דל” הוי מסתכל בו היאך לזכות בו.

Rabbi Yonah said: “Happy is the one who gives to the person in need” is not what the verse says, but rather, “Happy is the one who is *maskil* to the person in need,” meaning, s/he should look at the person [and consider] how one can achieve merit through [helping] him.

(Leviticus Rabbah 34:1, Margoliot 4:773)

Questions:

- There is a traditional Jewish belief that one who gives another person tzedekah achieves “merit”--either some kind of reward in this life or eternal life in the world to come. What are the spiritual (and other) rewards of helping people in need?

- What should our own self-interest be (as individuals or as a community) when we plan actions to address the hardships faces by others?

Discussion questions:

- Looking at all three texts together, what are the different things a congregation should consider in taking action to address issues like poverty?
- What issues do you feel are not addressed by these texts? How would you define “*maskil*” in relation to those in need? How can a congregation be *maskil* in its planning and implementation of social justice activities?