



## FOUR THOUGHTS ABOUT TZEDAKA

### I. Associating Coins with Tzedakah

Our family was once shopping at a large supermarket. Upon checking out, the store gave us a gift: an inflatable rubber ball with the logo of Strauss — one of Israel’s well-known ice cream companies — emblazoned on the ball. Our 3-year-old son blew up the ball and started playing with it on our way to the car until it fell. “Ima,” he said, “Please pick up the ball that says ‘Eat ice cream.’” My husband and I were amazed. There was nothing written on the ball

and this 3-year-old didn’t even know how to read. Even though the only print on the ball was the ice cream company’s logo, it was enough for him to understand the message. After all, he had been exposed to this message countless times over his first three years of life and knew exactly what it meant. I noted to myself that he didn’t say, “Please pick up the ball that says ‘Ice cream,’” but rather “Eat ice cream,” in the command form. I thought, the people in the marketing department definitely deserve a bonus.

This incident left me a little

pessimistic about education. I assumed that I was the one educating my child, not the advertising industry. What other subconscious messages was he receiving?

A short while later, we were at the playground with a friend. Her children were playing with her purse, and then her 3-year-old daughter dropped a coin on the ground. “Ima,” she said, “I dropped the tzedakah!”

She did not say she dropped the money or the coin, or the shekel. This piece of metal did not speak to her — like most people — in materialistic

terms. We would immediately think “what could be bought with such a coin, and where can we find more?” But she was educated from her infant years that this coin is, first and foremost, used for charity. This coin came into the world in order that we could give it to others. That is its purpose. The money that we have is not really ours; we are just a conduit to get it to the right place. What a “girsā d’yankuta” — childhood lesson!

I smiled to myself. If it’s possible to ingrain in us commercial messages from infancy, it is also possible to ingrain from infancy that money is first and foremost used for tzedakah.

## II. Tzedakah to Counter Idolatry

Years later, I received a gift from my father-in-law, a book by Rav Shlomo Wolbe called *HaMitzvot HaShekulot*. Rav Wolbe was a great educator, a student of the Mir Yeshiva, who brought the methods of the Mussar Movement to a budding Eretz Yisrael. He has raised generations of students with the concepts of self-thought and contemplation. In contrast to his more famous books, such as *Alei Shor*, *HaMitzvot HaShekulot* is almost unknown. I started reading it and couldn’t put it down.

Rav Wolbe writes about the seven mitzvot that our rabbis teach that are “equal to the whole Torah.” They are: denying idolatry, tzitzit, Shabbat,

Torah learning, circumcision, charity and Eretz Yisrael. He then explains them one by one, but in a specific order. In his opinion, there is a ladder we must climb, from the first stage, to the second, and so on. One of Rav Wolbe’s grandchildren once said that every day before he began to read Shema, Rav Wolbe would close his eyes and concentrate, thinking about the seven steps.




The first mitzvah on this ladder is denying idolatry. We cannot begin our spiritual quest if we are enslaved to foreign concepts or if other values are sacred in our eyes. We must first know that the Torah is primary and only then can we move forward. Rav Wolbe writes that according to the Midrash, Avraham Avinu wrote a 400-chapter book detailing all the aspects of the



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idolatry in his generation. Today, there are far fewer physical statues and idols, but even in our generation we can write a book about the various ways we are enslaved.

Then comes the second, yet somewhat surprising, rung on the ladder — tzedakah. Kindness fills the void that is left when we rid ourselves of the yetzer (evil inclination). Giving tzedakah is how we put into practice the first rung of the ladder. After all, much of our “idolatry” is about money — lust for money or using money to buy material items (clothing, cars, a home). The person who climbs to the second rung of the ladder and gives tzedakah says: I am no longer enslaved to wealth, to money or to materialism. I freed myself.

This is how Rav Wolbe describes it:

הכפירה בעבודה זרה למיניה היא יסוד התורה. כפירה זו חייבת להתבטא במעשה: בצדקה. ביכולת להיפרד מהכסף. בכל נתינת צדקה מודה האדם כי הכל לא שייך לו אלא לה, ואם אינו נותן צדקה – הוא הופך את כספו לעבודה זרה. צדקה היא צעד ענק קדימה בהתרחקות מההשתעבדות לעולם.

*Denial of idolatry of all kinds is a foundation of the Torah. This denial must be expressed in deed: in charity. In an ability to separate oneself from money. In all charitable giving, man admits that nothing belongs to him but to God, and if he does not give charity, he turns his money into idolatry. Charity is a huge step forward away from enslavement to the world.*

### III. Innovative Charity

So how do we climb to this second rung of the ladder? How do we give charity properly? I recently heard about “innovative charity.” This is the type of donation that isn’t simply debited automatically from our account on a monthly basis (although that too is very praiseworthy!); This is a well-planned act that gets to the heart of what tzedakah is about. Perhaps this is the intent of the Torah in describing the mitzvah of tzedakah:

כִּי לֹא יִחַדֵּל אֲבִיוֹן מִקֶּרֶב הָאָרֶץ עַל כֵּן אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ לֵאמֹר פְּתַח תְּפִתָּח אֶת יָדְךָ לְאָחִיךָ לְעִנְיָךְ וְלְאֲבִינֶךָ בְּאֶרֶץךָ.

*For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I*

*command you: open your hand (patoach tiftach) to the poor and needy kinsman in your land.*

### Devarim 15:11

Why not just say open your hand? Why does it say *p.t.ch.* two times — *patoach tiftach*? Many commentators explain that there are two aspects of charity — the money itself and the atmosphere created by the act of giving. The *Kli Yakar*, for example, writes “*hanetinah b’yad v’hapiyus b’feh*” — the giving is with our hand and the reassurance is with our mouth. That is, we do not only consider the act of giving, but also the way in which it is given. The goal is not just to give the money to the poor person, but to think about how to restore him, how to give him exactly what he needs, how to avoid shaming him, and how to help him in a customized way that is most effective and sensitive to his needs.

Here are just two examples: In one neighborhood, it was customary for all residents of the neighborhood to buy groceries on credit and pay the bill once a month. One Jew told the





grocer that when the poor came to pay, the grocer should only charge for half of the bill, and he would pay the remainder himself. And so the poor took groceries like everyone else, paid like everyone else once a month and felt no shame. This is a type of *matan b'seter* (secret giving) that involves sophistication and attention.

The second story I covered myself in the Israeli media. Yom Tov Maaya, age 60, works as a janitor. He had a dream: to write a sefer Torah scroll, but he knew that this was an expensive task. For seven consecutive years (!), he finished his regular job and then went out to collect plastic bottles. For every bottle returned to the store he earned back 25 agurot (¼ of a shekel). He collected bottle after bottle, shekel after shekel, and managed to accumulate the necessary amount to purchase a sefer Torah. He then announced that the sefer Torah would be donated to the institution that he deemed most appropriate. An Israeli radio station hosted him on a special program in which he told his story. Out of 1,326 applications, his final choice was a synagogue in the city of Beer Sheva that was established in memory of a police officer who perished in a fire. Yom Tov Maaya

managed to convey a simple but important message: every *agurah* is important. Every small donation counts. Everything adds up in the end. A janitor can also write a Torah scroll. This too is a very innovative way to teach us about the value of giving.

#### IV. Being on The Receiving End

But why talk about ourselves only as donors? I do not want to offend the readers, but in a certain sense — as Rabbi Nachman of Breslov explains — we are all beggars as well. Yes, this is true even if we give a lot of *tzedakah* and have a high net worth. We are all beggars of attention, of relationships, of love. “No man is an island,” wrote English poet John Donne. We need others, not for their money, but for their smile, their presence and their warm embrace. And in the age of social media, sometimes we just need their “likes.” Positively embracing others on social networks can really be “social charity” for some people.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov dealt extensively in his writings with the lessons we can learn from beggars. He begins his famous story “The Story of Seven Beggars” with the

following phrase: “I’ll tell you how happy they were.” The beggars’ joy in the story is simple, innocent and wholesome. They are not dependent on the outside world, are not chasing educational credentials or livelihood, they are not trying to impress anyone. While none of us want to be beggars, preferring always to be giving rather than taking, Rabbi Nachman reveals how each beggar has very high spiritual potential that has been hidden from us.

In these days of repentance and self-improvement, it is very empowering to know that we are imperfect, that we have the ability to let go and reveal the flaws and deficiencies that are within us. In a world that emphasizes individualism and personal accomplishments, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov provides us with great comfort that lies in our ability to admit that we also sometimes need help.

May we all merit to see a coin and associate it directly with charity, destroy idolatry by giving our money to others, find innovative ways to give charity sensitively and effectively, and admit that we are — sometimes — beggars.

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