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THE RABBINIC CONCEPT OF TSEDAKAH

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DIGEST	1
INTRODUCTION	11
CHAPTER I: THEOLOGY OF <u>TSEDAKAH</u>	1
CHAPTER II: THE RABBINIC VIEW OF POVERTY AND THE HUMILIATION OF ACCEPTING <u>TSEDAKAH</u>	17
CHAPTER III: THE REWARDS OF GIVING <u>TSEDAKAH</u>	31
CHAPTER IV: THE PENALTIES OF NOT GIVING <u>TSEDAKAH</u>	55
CHAPTER V: THE ROLE OF <u>TSEDAKAH</u> IN THE COMMUNITY	61
CHAPTER VI: THE URGENCY OF GIVING <u>TSEDAKAH</u>	68
CHAPTER VII: GIVING <u>TSEDAKAH</u> DISCREETLY OR INDIRECTLY	73
CHAPTER VIII: RULES EFFECTING THE DONOR OF <u>TSEDAKAH</u>	81
CHAPTER IX: ALMS COLLECTORS	89
CHAPTER X: THE PRIORITIES IN GIVING <u>TSEDAKAH</u>	97
CHAPTER XI: VOWS AND <u>TSEDAKAH</u>	107
CHAPTER XII: MOTIVATION IN GIVING <u>TSEDAKAH</u>	117
CHAPTER XIII: <u>TSEDAKAH</u> IN RELATION TO OTHER <u>MITSVOT</u>	123
CHAPTER XIV: <u>TSEDAKAH</u> IN RESPECT TO <u>SHABAT</u> AND FAST DAYS	130
CHAPTER XV: BIBLICAL FIGURES PERFORMING <u>TSEDAKAH</u>	137
CHAPTER XVI: RESTRICTIONS UPON THE DONEE AND RECEIVING <u>TSEDAKAH</u> FRAUDULENTLY	144
CHAPTER XVII: <u>TSEDAKAH</u> AND THE GENTILE COMMUNITY	152
CONCLUSION	156
BIBLIOGRAPHY	157
TRANSLITERATION SYSTEM	162

DIGEST

The concept of Tsedakah as set forth in rabbinic literature is one of the greatest moral insights in the history of the Jewish people. Since the dawn of humanity there has always been poverty and its concomitant suffering. The Hebrew Scriptures, especially the Prophets, recognized that we have a responsibility to ameliorate the plight of the poor.

The Rabbis refined this moral insight into an extensive system of Tsedakah. Their fundamental premise is that every human being is made in the image of God and thus the dignity of every individual must be respected. Each one of us has the obligation to enhance the lives of others so that they may live in dignity. Poverty has the potential of undermining an individual's sense of dignity and self-worth. The system of Tsedakah as developed by the Rabbis is an instrumentality that sensitizes us to the needs of the poor and our obligations on their behalf.

Moral insights and comments about Tsedakah are found throughout the vast body of rabbinic literature. This project attempts to present a survey of the rabbinic sources concerning Tsedakah. The objective of this thesis is to present the reader with an analysis of the system of Tsedakah as created and understood by the Rabbis. The system of analysis was to divide Tsedakah into different categories and to comment upon the rabbinic texts utilized. It is hoped the reader will comprehend and appreciate the moral insights that are inherent in the rabbinic concept of Tsedakah.

INTRODUCTION

During the course of Jewish history the word Tsedakah evolved in meaning. Initially during the biblical period the word was used in the sense of "righteousness". A Tsadik, such as Noah (Gen. 6:9), was a righteous or just individual. However, during the rabbinic period, approximately 200 C.E. until 600 C.E., the same word had a new meaning. Although not universal in application, the primary usage of Tsedakah during the above time period was in the sense of "righteous giving". Tsedakah was deemed to be a mitsvah, a commandment, to assist others. Thus, the English word "charity" is an inadequate translation of the rabbinic concept of Tsedakah. Charity implies that it is within the discretion of the donor as to whether to give, to whom and how much. From the rabbinic standpoint Tsedakah was a mandatory obligation upon every Jew and an elaborate system of restrictions, expectations and obligations were imposed upon both the donor and the donee.

The objective of this thesis is to present the reader with an analysis of the above system of Tsedakah as created and understood by the Rabbis. The primary tool for such analysis will be the rabbinic texts themselves. It is through these passages that we will have an opportunity to enter the rabbinic mind in order to comprehend their value system, their perceptions, their prospectives and their prejudices.

The discussion of Tsedakah will be limited to almsgiving and the giving of material goods, such as food and clothing. The

reader should be alerted that this thesis does not intend to explore the vast area of Gemilut Hasadim, acts of loving-kindness, that is found in rabbinic literature. There are some similarities between these two rabbinic expressions; however, it was necessary to limit the scope of this work to Tsedakah. Tsedakah for our purposes will be defined as the religious obligation of a donor to provide some portion of his material wealth to a donee.

The methodology that was utilized for the above analysis was to identify and locate as many passages as possible in rabbinic literature that mentioned Tsedakah in the above context. Various indices were reviewed such as Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews, Soncino Talmud, Soncino Midrash, Goldschmidt's subject concordance to the Babylonian Talmud, the Kosovsky concordances, and Otsar Ha-Agadah by Gross. Those passages in which Tsedakah was not utilized according to the above definition were rejected from consideration.

The above process produced several hundred different texts which dealt with the concept of Tsedakah. Next these different passages were organized into different categories in order to provide a system of analysis. The passages were then translated into English with the objective of capturing some of the rabbinic parlance.

Present English translations, if available for the particular text, were consulted for the purpose of comparison. However, frequently such contemporary translations substantially

supplemented the original texts. The objective of the translations utilized in this thesis is to capture the essence of the language of the primary rabbinic sources to the greatest extent possible.

In regard to the biblical passages cited by the Rabbis, the primary translations came from the original and current translations published by The Jewish Publication Society of America. On some occasions, neither version was acceptable for the purposes of the particular text in question. In that case, an alternative version had to be utilized in order to capture the rabbinic understanding of the passage.

After the above selection and translation process, the texts were allocated to various chapters and assigned a certain sequence within the chapter. The final step was to analyze the texts in an effort to understand the rabbinic concept of Tsedakah. On occasion, the analysis includes comments of speculation, since we can never be certain of the entire intellectual and emotional frame of reference of the authors of the texts.

CHAPTER I
THEOLOGY OF TSEDAKAH

"What did Adam say on the first day? The earth is the Lord's and all that it holds, the world and its inhabitants (Ps. 24:1)."1 To the rabbinic mind it was logical that Adam would quote the above verse. Adam's first perception of his environment required that he acknowledge God as the Creator of the universe and the Owner of all of its contents. Thus, from its inception, humanity was on notice that although it may temporarily retain possessions, ultimate ownership of all things belonged to God.

As Owner of the Land of Israel, God permitted certain members of Israelite society to temporarily possess the land. However, two distinctive castes were precluded from even such limited "ownership", namely the priestly class and the poor. What is the common link between the priests and the poor? "It is their common claim on God for protective support. Because neither group possesses a portion of the Land of Israel, neither can produce the food it needs. The priests, for their part, are forbidden by Scriptural law to own land (see Deut. 18:1-5). Instead, they act as God's servants in the Temple and are accorded food on that account. Similarly, the poor have lost whatever portion of the Land they may have possessed, and so are entitled to receive some of its yield. God supports both the priests and the poor because they neither own land nor attain the

economic prosperity promised to all Israelites who live in the Land (see Deut. 8:7-10)."²

The above quotation is from an introduction to Tractate Peah, which is a detailed rabbinic implementation of Tsedakah in respect to agriculture. In Peah the claims upon God for protection of the priestly class and the poor are satisfied through the actions of the Israelite tenant farmer. The farmer is working on God's Land and consequently a portion of its yield belongs to God. The Israelite farmer has a dual obligation in respect to the produce: a portion must be tithed to the priests and another portion set aside for the benefit of the poor.

"So underlying the designation of both priestly rations and poor-offerings is a single theory: God owns the entire Land of Israel and, because of this ownership, a portion of each crop must be paid to Him as a sort of sacred tax (see Lev. 27:30-33). According to Mishnah's framers, God claims that which is owed Him and then gives it to those under His special care, the poor and the priests."³

Thus, one approach to understanding Tsedakah from a theological point of view is to deem Tsedakah "as a sort of sacred tax." This "sacred tax" is, in effect, an acknowledgement of His benevolence. Furthermore, one has a responsibility in respect to the gifts that one has received from God. This concept is set forth in the following passage: Honor the Lord with your substance (Prov. 3:9). In explaining one's obligations pursuant to this verse, the Rabbis stated that it means: "From

what He has bestowed upon you. He gave you a son -- circumcize him; He gave you a house -- make a mezuzah and build a parapet. He gave you a yard -- build a sukah; He gave you a flock -- set aside the first born...He gave you gold and silver -- do mitsvot with them..."⁴

It is implied in the above passage that the mitsvot which one should perform in respect to one's "gold and silver" are to give Tsedakah. In addition, one has the obligation to distribute this Tsedakah to the poor. This is due to God's special relationship with the poor. This unique relationship is three-fold in nature, i.e.: 1) The poor are God's wards; 2) God is the champion of the poor; and 3) God, as a God of compassion, demands that those who are in a position to do so must help the less fortunate. As God's wards, the poor are members of one of His protected classes.

"Rabbi Lulianus of Dromeah said in the name of R. Yudah bar Simon that He [God] said [to Israel]: You have four classes of people in your household, your sons, your daughters, your menservants and your maidservants. Similarly, I have four classes: the Levites, the strangers, the orphans and the widows."⁵ The orphans and the widows are frequently mentioned by God since they are the most visible poor, usually without the ability to sustain themselves.

As members of a divinely protected class, the poor are entitled to divine legislation in which God commands others to assist the poor. The Rabbis commented upon this divine

legislation in their analysis of the biblical verse in Prov. 22:22: Do not rob the wretched because he is wretched; Do not crush the poor man in the gate. The Rabbis asked: "What does Scripture refer to? If he is poor, of what can he be robbed? Scripture therefore must refer to the gifts for the poor which one is obligated to give, the gleanings, the forgotten sheaves, the corners of the fields and the tithes. God warned that no man may rob them of these gifts which they are entitled to receive since they are poor. Not content with what the owner of the fields possesses, he would even rob the poor of that which God has granted them!"⁶

In the Bible, God used the prophets to champion His cause for the poor. This prophetic championship left an indelible impression upon the rabbinic mind. "It has had the effect of inculcating in the mind of the Jew the realization that poverty is not a stigma of disgrace, nor a sign of inherent inferiority. Poverty might be due entirely to the existing standards of society, which permit injustice and greed to grow rampant."⁷ Thus, one should not have contempt for the poor, rather they should be esteemed due to their closeness to God. Rabbinic literature emphasizes this close relationship. Shemot Rabah states that the poor are God's nation.⁸ Bavli, Nedarim 81a declares that "from amongst the poor goest forth the Torah."

God is compassionate as set forth in the Torah: If you take your neighbor's garment in pledge, you must return it to him before the sun sets; it is his only clothing, the sole covering

for his skin. In what else shall he sleep? Therefore, if he cries out to Me, I will pay heed, for I am compassionate (Exod. 22:25-26).

Since God is compassionate those human beings who lack compassion are defying God. To be devoid of a sense of compassion is, according to the Rabbis, a great sin. Concerning the rich men of Babylon, Rav said that they will go to Gehinom, for when a scholar asked them for money to engage in business they refused. When the scholar asked the rich men for food they also refused. Consequently, these wealthy people must be descendants of the mixed multitude that had accompanied the Israelites when they left Egypt. "For it is written: And [He will] show you compassion and have compassion upon you (Deut. 13:18). Thus, whoever is compassionate to his fellow-men is certainly of the children of our father Abraham, and whosoever is not merciful to his fellow-men is certainly not of the children of our father Abraham."⁹ It should be noted that this passage indicates that compassion is an inherent quality of the Jewish people. To be compassionate is part of the covenantal obligations to God undertaken by the people of Abraham.

The divine quality of compassion was instrumental in creating the universe. "With seven things the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world, namely: knowledge, understanding, might, loving-kindness and compassion, judgment and rebuke."¹⁰ Since God also created the people of Israel, compassion is also an essential element of their collective personality.

King David said that "This nation [Israel] is distinguished by three characteristics: [they are] compassionate, God-fearing and charitable. 'Compassionate', for it is written: And show you compassion, and in His compassion increase you as He promised your fathers on oath (Deut. 13:18); 'God-fearing', for it is written: [Moses answered the people, Be not afraid, for God has come only in order to test you,] and in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray (Exod. 20:17; 'Charitable', for it is written: For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing Tsedakah and what is right, in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him (Gen. 18:19)."11

Consequently, it can be seen that being compassionate and giving Tsedakah are qualities that God expects from the people of Israel. God has this expectation since He demands that we imitate His divine attributes. This leads to the principle of Imitatio Dei, the imitation of God by humanity. By being compassionate, man likens himself to his Creator. In analyzing a difficult word in the verse: The Lord is my strength and might; He is become my salvation. This is my God and I will enshrine Him, The God of my father and I will exalt him (Exod. 15:2), "Aba Shaul says: I will enshrine Him, that is to be like Him, just as He is gracious and compassionate, so you should be gracious and compassionate."12

There are two purposes as to why one should imitate the divine attributes of compassion in God. First is the mitsvah of the act itself which provides assistance to those in need. In addition, in performing an act of compassion one is ennobled and elevated. One sublimates the self through the action. "In a general sense these two aspects apply to all mitsvot. For aside from the purpose of the act of the mitsvah qua the specific act of that particular mitsvah, all mitsvot effect a refinement and sublimation of man...And conversely too, transgressions of the mitsvot effect a spiritual defilement and obtuseness..."¹³

Thus, for the rabbinic mind it was imperative that man, like God, should act with compassion. "How? Like the Holy One, may His great name be blessed for ever and ever. He has compassion upon Israel wherever they dwell; His compassion is upon the poor and the needy, upon those who suffer and are in want, upon orphans when they require help and upon widows at all times. Similarly, a human being should be compassionate toward Israel wherever they dwell, compassionate toward the poor and the needy, toward those who suffer and are in want, toward orphans when they require help, and toward widows at all times, so that his own wife be not widowed and his own children be not orphaned, as it is said: You shall not mistreat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me, and My anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword, and your own wives shall become widows and your children orphans (Exod. 22:21-23)." ¹⁴

God is the perfect role-model for man. To the extent of his abilities man should duplicate the acts of God. God acts purposefully and His actions teach us how to behave. If we have questions about our moral conduct we should look to God for guidance and inspiration.

R. Hama b. R. Hanina inquired as to the meaning of the verse You shall walk after the Lord your God (Deut. 13:5). "Is it possible for man to walk after the Shekhinah? [This must mean] to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. Just as He clothes the naked, as it is written: And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them (Gen. 3:21), so you, too, should clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, as it is written: And the Lord appeared unto him in the oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18:1), so you, too, should visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be He, buried the dead, as it is written: And he buried him in the valley (Deut. 34:6), so you, too, should bury the dead."¹⁵

It is interesting to note that according to the Rabbis, Tsedakah was not only practiced on earth; the angels themselves gave Tsedakah. Since compassion is a divine attribute, celestial beings as well as human beings were obligated to practice Tsedakah. "R. Ami asked R. Shmuel b. Nahman, What is the meaning of the text: Your Tsedakah also, O God, which reachest unto high heaven... (Ps. 71:19)? He answered him, Just as the lower ones [human beings] need each other's Tsedakah, so do the upper ones [angels] need each other's Tsedakah. Thus it is written: He

spoke to the man clothed in linen... (Ezek. 10:2)."¹⁶ The man clothed in linen in the above verse was a cherub; thus, the cherubim wore clothes and some of them must have needed clothing. Not all of the cherubim wore linen, and thus the poorer ones, like humans, were in need of Tsedakah.

Not only did the angels perform Tsedakah, but God Himself did as well. The following passage compares various acts of Tsedakah by God and asks which is the greatest act of Tsedakah. In the first paragraph, the idolatrous conduct of the Danites is discussed. Nevertheless, God granted the Danites victory in their war against the people of Laish. In the second paragraph, R. Shmuel bar Nahmani declares that still a greater act of Tsedakah by God was his sending manna to the Hebrews even though they were still worshipping idols.

"They [the Danites] took that which Micah had made (Judg. 18:27) -- that is, the idol's image, and the priest whom he had (ibid.) -- that is, the idolatrous priest, and they came unto Laish, unto a people quiet and secure (ibid.) -- they worshipped an idol and the idol brought them success. Is there any greater Tsedakah? Unto you, O Lord, belongeth Tsedakah, but unto us we have shame (Dan. 9:7).

"R. Shmuel bar Nahmani said: You find that the day that manna came down for Israel is the same day on which they worshipped idols. Even more, they took of the manna and sacrificed it to their idols. That is what is written: My bread also which I gave you... (Ezek. 16:19)."¹⁷

Another theological explanation of Tsedakah is that God is constantly testing people to see how they respond to the needs of the poor. Thus one's moral character is revealed to God by how one reacts to the daily opportunities of performing Tsedakah. "Happy is the man who can withstand the test, for there is none whom God does not test. He tests the rich man to see if his hand is open to the poor..."¹⁸

Since the poor are a protected class of God, He is always near them and observes how they are treated. "R. Abun said: The poor man stands at your door, and the Holy One, blessed be He, stands at his right hand. If you give unto him, He who stands at his right hand will bless you, but if not, He will condemn you, as it is written: Because He stands at the right hand of the needy, to save him from those who would condemn him (Ps. 109:31)."¹⁹ Thus, God is in an ideal position to administer the tests of whether or not one performs Tsedakah and to grade the examinee accordingly.

The uncertainty and unpredictability of life influenced the rabbinic mind set. A person could never be completely confident that he or she would retain their wealth. One could not afford to ignore the duty of giving Tsedakah, since one would never know when God would will that the individual would himself be in need. "Because there is an ever rotating wheel in this world, and he who is rich today may not be so tomorrow, and also he who is poor today may not be so tomorrow. One He casts down, and the other

He raises up, as it says: For God it is who gives judgment; He brings down one man, He lifts up another (Ps. 75:8)."20

This uncertainty in the rabbinic world required one to avail oneself of every opportunity to give Tsedakah, since one could not be sure of the outcome of any particular act of Tsedakah. "R. Yehoshu'a said: If you gave a perutah to a poor man in the morning and another poor man came and stood before you in the evening, give to him too; for you do not know if both acts from your hand will survive. As it is said: Sow your seed in the morning, and don't hold back your hand in the evening, since you don't know which is going to succeed, the one or the other, or if both are equally good (Eccl. 11:6)."21

In addition to the uncertainty in their world, the Rabbis were concerned with theodicy as well. In particular, they asked themselves why this evil known as poverty existed. Why did God permit people to be poor? A rabbinic response to these troubling questions is found in the following passage concerning a dialogue between a skeptical Gentile, Turnus Rufus, and Rabbi 'Akiva.

"And this question was asked by Turnus Rufus to R. 'Akiva: If your God loves the poor why does He not support them? He said: So that we may be saved through them from the punishment of Gehinom. I will tell you a simile. What is this thing like? To a King of flesh and blood who was angry with his servant and put him in prison and ordered concerning him that he should not be given food or drink. And a man went and gave him food and drink. When the King heard this, would he not be angry with him? And you

are called servants, as it is written: For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants; they are My servants whom I freed from the land of Egypt, I the Lord their God (Lev. 25:55).

"Rabbi 'Akiva responded: I will tell you a simile, what is this thing like? To a King of flesh and blood who was angry with his son and put him in a prison and ordered concerning him that he should not be given food or drink. A man went and gave him food and drink. When the King heard this, would he not send him a present? And we are called sons, as it is written: You are the sons of the Lord your God (Deut. 14:1).

"Turnus Rufus said to him: You are called both sons and servants. When you do according to the will of God you are called sons and when you do not do according to the will of God, you are called servants. And now you are not doing according to the will of God."

"Rabbi 'Akiva replied: Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to take the wretched poor into your home? When you see the naked, to clothe them and not to ignore your own kin (Isa. 58:7)."22

In the first portion of the above passage, Rabbi 'Akiva is confronted with the perplexing problem of how a compassionate God could allow so much suffering by the poor. Why did He create the poor? Rabbi 'Akiva's response indicates that to the rabbinic mind, the poor were an instrumentality for salvation. By assisting the poor, by giving them Tsedakah, one may avoid the punishment of Gehinom (the netherworld). The concept of reward

and punishment in respect to Tsedakah will be discussed in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

After the initial explanation by Rabbi 'Akiva, the skeptic Turnus Rufus contends that since God created the poor this must be His desire. Since He has His reasons, any efforts to ameliorate the condition of the poor would be deemed by God as an act of disobedience by His "servants".

In rebuttal, Rabbi 'Akiva submits that another analogy is more appropriate. Since the poor, as well as the rest of humanity, are all "sons" of God, then God would certainly be grateful if some of the children of God helped His poor "sons".

In response, Turnus Rufus states that the Israelites are known by two different designations, as "servants" and as "sons". When they are disobedient they are "servants" and when they are obedient they are "sons". By performing Tsedakah they must be disobedient "servants". In the final repartee of the argument, Rabbi 'Akiva abandons the servant-son distinction and simply quotes the above passage of Isa. 58:7 which requires of all humanity that they respond to the needs of the poor.

It should also be kept in mind that the Rabbis were quite aware of their mission to perform Tikun 'Olam, repair of the world. They believed that the world was not perfect and that God created humanity to effectuate positive change on this planet. Helping the poor, performing Tsedakah, would certainly be consistent with this divine purpose of humanity. In a dialogue similar to the above, a philosopher was asking the same kind of

questions to R. Hosha'yah. The rabbinic response was: "All that was created during the six days of creation requires improvement. For example, the mustard and the lupine need sweetening, the wheat needs to be ground, and even a person needs improvement."²³

Thus it can be seen that the performance of Tsedakah is partially fulfilling God's mission for humanity and thus would bring us closer to God. This line of reasoning is evident in the following rabbinic passage: "R. Le'azar b. R. Yose said: From where [in Scripture can we learn that] Tsedakah and Gemilut Hasadim [cause] great peace and are a great link between Israel and their Father in Heaven as it says: For thus saith the Lord: Enter not into the house of mourning, neither go to lament, neither bemoan them; for I have taken away My peace from this people, saith the Lord, even loving-kindness and compassion (Jer. 16:5). 'Loving-kindness' is Gemilut Hasadim and 'compassion' is Tsedakah which teaches us that Tsedakah and Gemilut Hasadim cause a great peace between Israel and their Father in Heaven."²⁴

The above passage alludes to the strong connection between Tsedakah and peace. By performing Tsedakah we enhance the prospects of peace in this world. Under the divine scheme, Tsedakah and peace are interrelated and interdependent. Thus, we have the famous phrase: "The more Tsedakah the more peace."²⁵

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER I

1. Avot de Rabbi Natan, chapter 17, version B, Schechter edition; parallel in Bavli, Rosh Hashanah 31a.
2. Brooks, Roger, Support for the Poor in the Mishnaic Law of Agriculture: Tractate Peah; Chico, California: Scholar's Press, 1983, pp.17-18.
3. Ibid., p.18.
4. Pesikta Rabati 25, p.126b.
5. Pesikta de Rav Kahana 11, p.100a, Buber edition; see also Deut. 16:14.
6. Bamidbar Rabah 5:1.
7. Kaplan, Mordecai M., "Jewish Philanthropy: Traditional and Modern" in: Farris, E., Laune, F., and Todd, A. [eds.]. Intelligent Philanthropy. Chicago, 1930: pp.52-89; 64.
8. Shemot Rabah 31:13.
9. Bavli, Betsah 32b.
10. The Fathers According to Rabbi Natan (transl. Judah Goldin) New York, 1955 [1974], chapter 37, p.153.
11. Bavli, Yevamot 79a.
12. Bavli, Shabat 133b.
13. Schochet, Jacob I. Gemiluth Chassadim. Brooklyn, New York, 1967; p.15.
14. Seder Eliyahu Rabah 27, p.143, Friedmann edition.
15. Bavli, Sotah 14a.
16. Vayikra Rabah 31:1.
17. Pesikta de Rav Kahana 11, p.99a, Buber edition.
18. Shemot Rabah 31:3.
19. Rut Rabah 5:9.
20. Shemot Rabah 31:3.
21. Avot de Rabbi Natan, chapter 3, version A, Schechter edition.

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER I

22. Bavli, Bava Batra 10a.
23. Bereshit Rabah 11:6.
24. Tosefta, Peah 4:21, p.61, Lieberman edition; parallel in Bavli, Bava Batra 10a.
25. Mishnah, Avot 2:7.

CHAPTER II
THE RABBINIC VIEW OF POVERTY AND
THE HUMILIATION OF ACCEPTING TSEDAKAH

One's obligations in respect to Tsedakah depended to some extent upon the particular circumstances of the donee. One's responsibilities were not limited to the assistance of only those members of society who spent their entire lifespan on the lowest economic rung. A formerly wealthy individual who was without meat and wine could be an appropriate recipient of Tsedakah. Preserving and enhancing the dignity of the individual recipient was of paramount concern to the Rabbis. Consequently, "poverty" should be understood as a relative term for the rabbinic mind. Since the ideal was to satisfy the particular needs of each individual, what may be deemed as "wealth" for one person may be concurrently considered as "poverty" by another. Thus, the reader should keep in mind this rather "flexible" understanding of the condition of poverty.

Nevertheless, the Rabbis struggled to define poverty. One attempt is found in the following text: "Eight names were given to the poor man: 'ani, evyon, misken, rash, dal, dakh, makh, and helekh. 'Ani means 'poor' in its literal sense; evyon because he longs (metaev) for everything; misken because he is despised by all, as it says, Wisdom is better than strength; nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard (Eccles. 9:16); rash because he is dispossessed (mitroshesh) of property; dal because he is detached (meduldal) from property;

dakh because he is crushed (medukhdakh) - he sees a thing and cannot eat it, he sees a thing and cannot taste it, he sees a thing and cannot drink it; makh because he is lowly (makh) before everyone, like a kind of lowly threshold. Accordingly, Moses forewarns Israel: If thy brother be waxen poor, [and sell some of his possessions, then shall his kinsman that is next unto him come, and shall redeem that which his brother hath sold] (Lev. 25:25)."¹

Even using some of the concepts listed above, one should readily see that it could apply to various people depending upon their previous station in life. A formerly rich individual may be crushed (medukhdakh) because he cannot eat expensive meat and drink costly wine any longer. A person who has been destitute all his life may be crushed that he has absolutely nothing edible to put into his stomach.

The predominant rabbinic view was that poverty was a permanent condition that would always be endured by at least some members of society. Even in the messianic era poverty would continue. "For Shmuel said: There is no difference between this world and the days of the Messiah except for oppression through foreign powers, as it says: For the poor shall never cease out of the land... (Deut. 15:11)."² Since poverty will always be with us, each one of us has a responsibility to alleviate the evil and suffering of poverty. This is one of our major roles in our mission to perform Tikun 'Olam (see discussion of this point on pages 13-14).

Since poverty would exist in each generation, one could not safely assume that poverty would never touch one's family or one's descendants. To the contrary, since humanity cannot totally escape from poverty, sooner or later it will visit its misfortune upon every family. "It was taught, R. Ele'azar Ha-Kapar said: A man should always pray for mercy to be spared this fate [poverty], for if he does not come into poverty his son will, and if not his son, his grandson, for it is said, because that for [bigelal] this thing... (Deut. 15:10). The School of R. Yishma'el taught: It is a wheel [galgal] that revolves in the world."³

To understand the above fatalistic philosophy that to some extent poverty is beyond one's control, we need to examine the following two verses: Beware that there be not a base thought in thy heart, saying: The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and thine eye be evil against thy needy brother, and thou give him nought; and he cry unto the Lord against thee, and it be sin in thee. Thou shalt surely give him and thy heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him; because that for this thing the Lord thy God will bless thee in all thy work, and in all that thou puttest thy hand unto (Deut. 15:9-10). The key word in the text is "because" since in Hebrew the word for "because" [bigelal] contains the letters for "wheel" [galgal]. From this text the Rabbis contended that a realistic perspective of poverty is that it is similar to a revolving wheel that will eventually

touch every family (see pages 10-11 in reference to the uncertainty and unpredictability of life.)

This wheel of poverty is driven by God's will and is not within the control of humanity. In commenting upon the phrase even to the poor with thee which is found in the following verse, If thou lend money to any of My people, even to the poor with thee, thou shalt not be to him as a creditor; neither shall ye lay upon him interest (Exod. 22:24), the Rabbis quoted another biblical verse and offered the following explanation: For God is judge; He putteth down one, and lifteth up another (Ps. 75:8). "To what is the world likened? To a wheel in a garden; the earthenware vessels attached to it ascend full from below and descend empty from above. In the same way the one who is not rich today is rich tomorrow, and he who is poor today is not poor tomorrow. Why? Because there is a rotating wheel in the world, as it is written, Because [bigelal] that for this thing... (Deut. 15:10). R. Aha said: There is a wheel that rotates in this world, because it says, A wise king sifteth the wicked, and turneth the wheel [ofan] over them (Prov. 20:26)."⁴ In this text an alternative word for wheel, ofan, is used as well as galgal from the word bigelal. The concept of the cyclical nature of life remains unchanged.

The metaphor of a rotating water wheel is found frequently in rabbinic literature. In juxtaposition to the words Thou shalt surely give him (Deut. 15:10) cited by R. Aibu, "R. Nahman said: Because [bigelal] that for this thing (ibid.), Bigelal means that

this world is like a pumping-wheel [galgela] through which the full is emptied and the empty filled."⁵ In this case the "full" are the rich and the "empty" are the poor.

Another analogy utilized by the Rabbis to demonstrate the ever-changing nature of wealth and poverty is that of ladders given by God to humans that cause their ascent or descent on the rungs of economic fortune. "A matron asked R. Yose b. Halafta. She said to him: Everybody admits that in six days God created the world. From those six days until now, what has He been doing? He said to her: He causes people to ascend ladders of fortune and to descend the ladders, saying, So-and-so who was rich shall become poor, and So-and-so who was poor shall become rich; as it is stated, The Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich... (1 Sam. 2:7)."⁶

A similar midrash makes the same point but cites a different scriptural verse. "A matron asked R. Shim'on b. Halafta: In how many days did the Holy One, blessed be He, create the world? He said to her: In six; as it says, For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth (Exod. 20:11). Said she: What has He been doing from then until now? He said: He sits and makes ladders, whereby he elevates one and puts down another. Accordingly it says, For God is judge; He putteth down one, and lifteth up another (Ps. 75:8)."⁷

The Rabbis were quite aware that wealth and poverty were ephemeral phenomena that were constantly in flux. They used puns to illustrate this perception. "Therefore, wealth is called

nekhasim because it is concealed [nekhsin] from one and revealed to another. Why are certain coins called zuzin? Because they are removed [zazin] from one and given to another."⁸

The economic destiny of every human being was in the hands of God. God ultimately decided whether one would be rich or poor and the duration of such status. In commenting upon this verse The rich and the poor meet together - The Lord is the maker of them all (Prov. 22:2), the Rabbis stated that God made "the poor man who stretches out his hand, and the householder who does not want to give to him anything; He who made this one rich will in the future make him poor, and He who made this one poor will in the future make him rich."⁹

Immediately following the above passage attributing to God the role of fashioning everyone's financial circumstances, the author continues with his assessment of the condition of poverty. "Nothing is harder to bear than poverty; for he who is crushed by poverty is like one to whom all the sufferings of the world cling and upon whom all the curses in Deuteronomy came. Our Teachers said: If all suffering were assembled on one side and poverty on the other, poverty would outweigh them."¹⁰

Over and over again in rabbinic texts a reader will find that the rabbinic view of poverty was that it was a terrible evil, perhaps the worst suffering that a human could endure. "R. Pinhas b. Hama gave this exposition: Poverty in one's home is worse than fifty plagues, for it is said, Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends; for the hand of God hath touched

me (Job 19:21) and his friends answered him, Take heed, regard not iniquity; for this has thou chosen rather than poverty (Job 36:21).¹¹ The above rabbinical interpretation depends upon mathematical extrapolation. Since ten plagues were inflicted upon the Egyptians with one finger of God (Exod. 8:15) then fifty plagues must have been inflicted upon Job since he was touched by the hand of God, which, like humans, has five fingers. In any event, the above quote is useful in depicting the rabbinic hyperbole that matched poverty against virtually all other sufferings. Poverty was considered to be the most difficult to endure. In fact, poverty undermined the very foundation of life and reduced one to the status of a dead person. Four categories of individuals are accounted for as dead. One of these categories is that of a poor man.¹²

What was the reason that poverty was characterized by the Rabbis as such an unbearable agony? The explanation is that poverty reduced one to economic dependence upon others. This dependence had the potential of destroying one's dignity and self-esteem. What could be worse than this?

Once one became dependent upon others for survival, a radical change devastated the individual and took its toll. "And R. Natan b. Aba said in the name of Rav: He who is dependent on another's table, the world is dark to him, for it is said: He wandereth abroad for bread: Where is it? He knoweth that the day of darkness is ready at his hand (Job 15:23). R. Hisda says: Also his life is no life. Our Rabbis taught: There are three

whose life is no life and they are: He who is dependent on the table of his neighbor..."¹³

A man becomes quickly effected by this dependency. "When a man eats of his own food his heart is gratified, but when he eats from the food of others his heart is embittered."¹⁴

Thus, poverty leads to the humiliation of being dependent upon Tsedakah for one's survival. This humiliation negatively transforms one in both a physical and a spiritual sense. "R. Yohanan and R. Eli'ezer both say: As soon as a man needs the support of his fellow-creatures his face is like the kerum, as it is said: As the kerum is to be reviled among the sons of men (Ps. 12:9). What is the 'kerum'? When R. Dimi came he said: There is a bird in the coastal towns whose name is kerum, and as soon as the sun shines upon it, it changes into several colors. R. Ami and R. Asi both say: [When a man needs the support of his fellow-beings] it is as if he were punished with two punishments, with fire and water. For it is said: When Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads, we went through fire and through water (Ps. 66:12)."¹⁵ In the above passage the Rabbis are making a pun on the word kerum which in the biblical verse cited (Ps. 12:9) is understood as "vileness". However, there was a bird also with the name of kerum which perhaps as part of its camouflage readily changed colors. Similarly, the human recipient of Tsedakah changed colors, commenced to blush, due to his immense sense of humiliation.

The recipient of Tsedakah accepts a "gift" from the donor; however, this "gift" is not entirely free. The donee inevitably pays a price, usually a loss of independence and perhaps a loss of self-worth. The Rabbis did not look favorably upon receiving these types of "gifts". "When receivers of gifts multiplied, the days of human life became fewer and years were shortened; as it is written, But he that hateth gifts shall live (Prov. 15:27)."16

Consequently, due to the rabbinic perception of poverty and its fostering of dependence, one should pray that one not be reduced to relying upon the "gifts" of another. It was permissible to rely upon God, but it was onerous to rely upon other human beings for sustenance. One such prayer is found in the following beautiful midrash that inquires as to why the dove in the Noah story returned with an olive branch in its beak. "R. Yirmeah b. Ele'azar said: What is it that is written, And lo in her mouth an olive-leaf freshly plucked (Gen. 8:11)? The dove said to the Holy One, blessed be He, Master of the universe, may my food be as bitter as the olive but entrusted to Your hand rather than sweet as honey and dependent on a mortal..."17

This dread of being compelled to accept Tsedakah led the Rabbis to encourage others to do everything in their power to prevent this tragedy. A great tragedy would occur if one's children had to rely upon Tsedakah. As a parent, the father did not have to support his children for the balance of their lives. However, if the children were reduced to a desperate situation in

which they would become dependent upon Tsedakah, the Rabbis often made an exception in regard to parental responsibility.

"When a man came before Rava he said to him: Will it please you that your children should be fed from Tsedakah? This ruling, however, has been laid down only for one who is not a wealthy man, but if the man is wealthy he may be forced even against his wish; as was the case with Rava who used compulsion against R. Natan b. Ami and extracted from him four hundred zuz for Tsedakah."18

In this passage it is first acknowledged that a father cannot be compelled to support his children. However, the above ruling was only limited to a man who himself was not wealthy. Since Rava was able to extract Tsedakah from a reluctant but wealthy individual, how much more so should one be able to compel a wealthy father to support his own children, even beyond their maturity, if the alternative was their dependence upon Tsedakah.

This same viewpoint is found in another text which urges the family to exhaust its funds before it permits the children to be supported by Tsedakah. "Raban Shim'on ben Gamliel says that Rabbi Meir used to say: If somebody says, give a shekel from my sons on Shabat, and if they are worthy to take a sela', they give them a sela' and for the rest they are supported from Tsedakah. The wise say, they are fed and go until the money is used and [only] then are they supported by Tsedakah."19

Given the above point of view about the humiliation of accepting Tsedakah, the Rabbis urged the people to accept

virtually any type of honest work rather than being dependent upon others. Work was honorable in itself and one should not disdain manual labor or the unpleasant tasks inherent in such work. This "work ethic" is described in the following test. "I have received from my grandfather's family: At all times shall one rather hire himself out to idol-worship than be in need of his fellow creatures. He meant actual 'Avodah Zarah, but it is not so, 'Avodah Zarah is work which is strange to him, as Rav said to R. Kahana: Flay a carcass in the street and earn a wage, and say not, I am a great man and the work is degrading to me."20

In the rabbinic world, work was inherently valuable to one's self-esteem and had a definite place in everyone's life. One of the most sacred human activities for the Rabbis was the study of Torah. However, even Torah study should not justify a total rejection of work. "All study of the Law without toil must in the end prove futile and lead to sin."21

Although work was highly valued in the age of the Rabbis it would be the height of insensitivity to remind a supplicant for Tsedakah of this. One could never be sure of the circumstances of the individual who was seeking Tsedakah. God will punish those how are cruelly insensitive to the applicant for Tsedakah. "If the rich man says to this same poor man: Why do you not go and work and get food? Look at those hips! Look at those legs! Look at that belly! Look at those lumps of flesh!, the Holy One, blessed be He, says to him: It is not enough that you have not given him anything of yours, but you set an evil eye upon what I

have given him. Consequently, If he hath begotten a son, there is nothing in his hand (Eccles. 5:13). He begets a son and he will not leave for him anything at all of his possessions, nor take unto himself anything! Accordingly Moses forewarns Israel, saying: If thy brother be waxen poor, and sells some of his possession, then shall his kinsman that is next unto him come, and shall redeem that which his brother hath sold (Lev. 25:25)."22

Although work was highly valued, one could not exacerbate the plight of the victim by reminding him of this value while he was attempting to collect Tsedakah. One could not turn away from one's responsibilities. One had to positively respond in some fashion when confronted with the obligation of giving Tsedakah. Turning away from this responsibility was considered a great sin. "Whoever turns away his eyes from Tsedakah is considered as if he were serving idols. It is written here, Beware that there be not a base thought in thine heart (Deut. 15:9) and it is written there, Certain base fellows are gone out (Deut. 13:14). Just as there it is idolatry, also here it is idolatry."23

In the first passage above it was a base thought and a sin to give thy needy brother nothing (Deut. 15:9). In the second passage, Deut. 13:14, the same Hebrew word for "base" is utilized. The verse reads: Certain base fellows are gone out from the midst of thee, and have drawn away the inhabitants of their city, saying: Let us go and serve other gods, which ye have not known. In the first instance it was "base" not to give

Tsedakah to the needy and in the second instance it was "base" to encourage others to commit idolatry. For the rabbinic mind both acts were comparable and equally egregious.

From the rabbinic prospective, the failure to give Tsedakah, the failure to positively respond to the needs of another human being was a great sin. The Rabbis believed that the dignity of every human being was of equal worth. One should value other people's dignity to be as precious as one's own. Rabbi 'Akiva stated that the major principle of the Torah is found in the verse, Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself (Lev. 19:18). In commenting upon the above position of Rabbi 'Akiva it has been written, "No one should say, Just as I have been humiliated, so, too, let others be humiliated. R. Tanhuma said: If you do so, know whom you are humiliating: You are made in the likeness of God (Gen. 5:1)."24

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER II

1. Vayikra Rabah 34:6.
2. Bavli, Berakhot 34b.
3. Bavli, Shabat 151b; parallel, Rut Rabah 5:9.
4. Shemot Rabah 31:14.
5. Vayikra Rabah 34:9.
6. Bamidbar Rabah 3:6.
7. Bamidbar Rabah 22:8; parallel, Bereshit Rabah 68:4.
8. Bamidbar Rabah 22:8.
9. Shemot Rabah 31:14.
10. Ibid.; see also Shemot Rabah 31:12.
11. Bavli, Bava Batra 116a.
12. Bavli, Nedarim 64b.
13. Bavli, Betsah 32b.
14. Seder Eliyahu Rabah 25, p.136, Friedmann edition.
15. Bavli, Berakhot 6b.
16. Bavli, Sotah 47b.
17. Bavli, 'Eruvin 18b.
18. Bavli, Ketubot 49b.
19. Tosefta, Ketubot 6:10.
20. Bavli, Bava Batra 110a; parallel Bavli, Pesahim 113a.
21. Mishnah, Avot 2:2.
22. Vayikra Rabah 34:4; parallel Vayikra Rabah 34:7, Kohelet Rabah 5:12, 1.
23. Bavli, Bava Batra 10a.
24. Bereshit Rabah 24:7.

CHAPTER III

THE REWARDS OF GIVING TSEDAKAH

A vast amount of rabbinic literature exists pertaining to the topic of the rewards of giving Tsedakah. Consequently, in order to facilitate analysis the subject matter has been divided into six separate subcategories. These subdivisions are as follows: A) Eligibility to obtain the reward; B) The power of Tsedakah; C) Reciprocity of benefit between the donor and the donee; D) Benefits obtained during one's lifetime; E) The Miracle Stories; F) Benefits in the World to Come.

A

ELIGIBILITY TO OBTAIN THE REWARD

Merely because one gives Tsedakah does not automatically entitle one to be rewarded. From the prospective of the Rabbis there were certain eligibility requirements. First, the Rabbis did not endorse the "Robin Hood" mentality; stealing from the rich and giving to the poor did not entitle one to any benefits. In interpreting the following verse: Better is a handful of quietness, Than both the hands full of labor and striving after wind (Eccles. 4:6), the Rabbis explained that the phrase Better is a handful of quietness means "Better is he who practices Tsedakah to a small extent from his own [assets] than one who steals, robs and oppresses and gives much Tsedakah from what belongs to others. A proverb states: She prostitutes herself for apples and gives them to the sick."¹

Furthermore, one cannot knowingly engage in sin and then expect the sin to be instantly purged by an act of Tsedakah. Such a practice would undermine the concept of Teshuvah. Giving Tsedakah does not result in divine permission to commit sin.

"R. Yoḥanan said: A simile about a man who committed a sin, and he had given a reward [payment] to a prostitute and had not yet left her doorstep when a poor person approached him. The poor individual said: Give me alms [Tsedakah]. He gave him alms and he walked away. The same man said: If the Holy One, blessed be He, had not wanted to forgive my sins, He would not have sent this poor man [to me] in order that I give him alms [Tsedakah] and thus be forgiven for what I did. (The Holy One, blessed be He, spoke to him: Wicked man, do not think so. But go and learn from the wisdom of Solomon: The hand which gives will not cleanse the other from the evil [Refer to Prov. 11:21])."2

There is another limitation upon the eligibility to obtain rewards from giving Tsedakah. This additional limitation has to do with Gentiles giving Tsedakah. This issue will be discussed in Chapter XVII.

Furthermore, in addition to the above restrictions, the quality of the reward is dependent upon how the act of Tsedakah was performed. For example, if Tsedakah is given discreetly the reward would be much greater than if the Tsedakah was given indiscreetly. The grace, the gentleness, the compassion and empathy that accompany the act of Tsedakah effect the reward. R. Ele'azar summarized this position by stating: "The reward of

teaches that Tsedakah rises before the Throne of Glory and this is what [Scripture] says: Tsedek shall go before Him as He sets out on His way (Ps. 85:14)."⁶ The practice of Tsedakah places one into a direct relationship with God.

The practice of Tsedakah is so powerful that it can effect God. God Himself is not totally independent of human action. With typical rabbinic hyperbole, the Rabbis argue that giving Tsedakah can even "save" God. "Not only this, but he who does justice and Tsedakah and preserves many lives...about him Scripture says: He has redeemed my soul with peace (Ps. 55:19). At the same time, the Holy One, blessed be He, asks [rhetorically]: Who ransomed Me and My Shekhinah [Divine Presence] and Israel from among the idolatrous nations of the world? It is the one who does justice and Tsedakah."⁷

Human acts of Tsedakah influence God to protect the donors of Tsedakah. One aspect of the power of Tsedakah is that it invokes God's infinite power on behalf of those who give Tsedakah. This point is emphasized in the rabbinic commentary on the following verse: May the Lord reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge! (Ruth 2:12).

The Rabbis rhetorically questioned who is entitled to this divine protection and they responded: "Come and see how great is the power of the Tsadikim, and how great is the power of Tsedakah, and how great the power of those who do kindly deeds, for they obtain shelter neither in the shadow of the morning, nor

in the shadow of the wings of the earth, nor in the shadow of the sun, nor in the shadow of the wings of the hayot, or the cherubim or the seraphim, but under whose wings do they obtain shelter? Under the shadow of Him who spoke and the world was created, as it is written: How precious is Your loving-kindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings (Ps. 36:8)."⁸

It should be noted, although not quoted by the Rabbis, the above scriptural citation follows this passage: Your Tsedakah is like the mighty mountains (Ps. 36:7). In the rabbinic mind God's Tsedakah and His Hesed [loving-kindness] would compel Him to protect those human beings who gave Tsedakah.

In a very poetic text the Rabbis compare the power of Tsedakah to nine other creations of God. Their conclusion is that Tsedakah has the greatest power. "It has been taught: R. Yudah says: Great is Tsedakah, in that it brings the redemption nearer, as it is written: Thus said the Lord: Observe what is right and do Tsedakah; For My salvation shall come, and My deliverance be revealed (Isa. 56:1). He used to say: Ten strong things have been created in the world. Rock is hard, but iron cuts it. Iron is hard, but fire softens it. Fire is hard, but water quenches it. Water is strong, but clouds carry it. Clouds are strong, but wind scatters them. Wind is strong, but the body bears it. The body is strong, but fright crushes it. Fright is strong, but wine banishes it. Wine is strong, but sleep works it

off. Death is stronger than all, and Tsedakah saves from death, as it is written, Tsedakah delivereth from death (Prov. 10:2)."9

In later sections of this chapter, the relationship between Tsedakah and death will be investigated. However, for the purposes of this particular unit the above passage again illustrates the tremendous power attributed by the Rabbis to the practice of Tsedakah.

C

RECIPROCITY OF BENEFIT BETWEEN THE DONOR AND THE DONEE

The quality of Tsedakah is that it simultaneously bestows a reward upon both the donor and the donee. If one truly appreciates this mutuality of benefit it precludes the donor from having feelings of patronizing the poor. The donor cannot condescend if he realizes that he is fortunate to have the opportunity to give Tsedakah. In short, giving Tsedakah is not an unilateral exchange in which the donor gives something and receives nothing in return. To the contrary, the practice of Tsedakah is a bilateral exchange in which both parties mutually benefit.

This concept is illustrated in the midrashic analysis of the verse in the Book of Ruth in which Naomi and Ruth discuss "gleaning" the field owned by Boaz. (Gleaning itself is a form of Tsedakah as described in Tractate Peah.) Her mother-in-law asked her: Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be he who took such generous notice of you! So she told

her mother-in-law whom she had worked with, saying: The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz (Ruth 2:19).

The commentary on this passage is: "It was taught in the name of R. Yehoshu'a: More than the homeowner does for the poor man does the poor man do for the homeowner, for Ruth said to Naomi: The name of the man with whom I worked today. She did not say: 'for whom I worked', but with whom I worked. I produced for him many works and benefits in return for the one morsel of food which he fed me."¹⁰

In receiving Tsedakah Ruth did not perceive of herself in a subservient position; she actually provided a greater benefit to Boaz than she herself received. In fact, in the same above rabbinic text it states: "R. Shiloh of Noveh said: Your wealth depends upon the poor man."¹¹ The person receiving Tsedakah enables the donor to retain his wealth.

A further example of the simultaneous mutual benefit of Tsedakah is evident from the following rabbinic discussion: "Another explanation of If your brother under you continues in straits and must give himself over to you, do not subject him to the treatment of a slave (Lev. 25:39). This is what is written in Scripture: The poor man and the oppressor meet together; The Lord giveth light to the eyes of them both (Prov. 29:13)...If the poor man stands together with the oppressor and says to him: Give me Tsedakah, and he gives it to him, then The Lord giveth light to the eyes of them both; the one obtains temporal life and the other the life of the World to Come."¹²

On page ten of this thesis the theological concept of God testing the individual is discussed. Within this context of "testing" the one who passes the "test" by giving Tsedakah receives rewards during his lifetime as well as posthumously. "If the rich man withstands his test and practices Tsedakah, then he will enjoy his wealth in this world, while the [reward for his good deeds] will be preserved for him in the World to Come..."¹³

D.

BENEFITS OBTAINED DURING ONE'S LIFETIME

By giving Tsedakah one may obtain Divine Providence. God will look after those individuals who properly fulfill the mitsvah of Tsedakah. During their lifetimes He will assist them. "Concerning those who are merciful, who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked and distribute Tsedakot, Scripture says: Say you of the Tsadik that it shall be well with him (Isa. 3:10)." ¹⁴

On a purely material level giving Tsedakah is not a losing proposition. As an incentive for donors, the Rabbis contended that God would replenish any funds expended upon Tsedakah. One should give freely since God would see to it that the donor did not experience a net loss.

"R. Yitshak said: What is the meaning of the verse: He that followed after Tsedakah and Hesed will find life, Tsedakah and honor (Prov. 21:21)? Because a man has followed after Tsedakah, shall he find Tsedakah? This, however, is to teach you that if a man is eager to give Tsedakah, the Holy One, blessed be He,

furnished him money with which to give it. R. Nahman b. Yitshak says: The Holy One, blessed be He, furnished him men who are fitting recipients of Tsedakah, so that he may be rewarded..."¹⁵ The effect of this comment is to minimize any anxieties on the part of the donor. God will provide the money for Tsedakah or replace the money already given. Additionally, God will provide the donor with appropriate and deserving donees in order that the donor will be readily rewarded.

One reward that the donor will receive is additional money to enable the donor to continue distributing Tsedakah. One's wealth will not be depleted by giving Tsedakah, since God will intervene in order to preserve one's capital. However, when God replenishes this wealth, one has a responsibility to give still more Tsedakah. "If you have done Tsedakah, you will be rewarded with money, And if you are rewarded with money, do Tsedakah with your money."¹⁶

In addition to replenishing his wealth the donor of Tsedakah may receive even a greater gift from God, namely good health and an increased lifespan. In the following story the donor is given the above rewards since he used his own personal wealth to help a starving family. He did not use as an excuse that the community did not have any funds to help the desperate family.

"It has been told of Binyamin Ha-Tsadic [the Righteous One] who was an administrator of the [communal] Tsedakah fund: Once a woman came to him in a year of scarcity, and said to him: Rabbi, support me! He said to her: I swear, there is nothing in the

Tsedakah fund. She said to him: Rabbi, if you do not support me, a woman and her seven children will perish. He stood up and supported her out of his own pocket. Some time later he became ill and was dying. The angels spoke to the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe, You said that he who preserves one soul of Israel is considered as if he had preserved the whole world; shall then Binyamin Ha-Tsadic, who has preserved a woman and her seven children die at an early age? At once his sentence [in the Divine Book of Life] was torn up. It has been taught that twenty-two years were added to his life."¹⁷

Although physical death cannot be completely avoided, Tsedakah has the capacity to preclude a donor from dying an untimely, unnatural death. The following passage discusses the famous passage in Prov.: Treasures of wickedness profit nothing; But Tsedakah delivereth from death (Prov. 10:2). This verse is interpreted by the Rabbis as delivering one from an unnatural or an evil death. An unnatural death is a premature death such as by accident. An evil death results in the deceased being condemned to Gehinom.

"Does then charity deliver from death? [This refers] to an evil death only."¹⁸ "If your brother is in straits (Lev. 25:25)-this is what is written: Happy is he who dealeth wisely with the poor; the Lord will deliver him in the day of evil (Ps. 41:2). Aba b. Yirmeah in the name of R. Meir said that is one who lets the Good Inclination rule over the Evil Inclination. R. Isi said this is one who gives a perutah to a poor man."¹⁹

An unnatural death may be avoided if one performs Tsedakah in a certain proscribed manner. When is a man delivered from an unnatural death? "When a man gives Tsedakah without knowing to whom he gives it, and the beggar receives it without knowing from whom he receives. He gives it without knowing to whom he gives it...The beggar receives it without knowing from whom he receives it...How is a man to do this? He should put [his money] into the Tsedakah box."20

E

THE MIRACLE STORIES

One cannot obtain a true understanding of the rabbinic concept of Tsedakah without a familiarity with various "miracle stories" demonstrating the almost magical quality of Tsedakah. This magical or mystical quality of Tsedakah can transform a tragedy or disaster into a positive experience. This is demonstrated in the following rabbinic discussion of the verse: A man's gift maketh room for him, and bringeth him before great men (Prov. 18:16).

"Once R. Eli'ezer and R. Yehoshu'a and R. 'Akiva went to the sands [the Harbor] of Antiochia to make a collection for scholars. There was one Aba Yudan, who used to generously support [the needy]. He became impoverished, and when he saw our Rabbis there, he went home and his face turned the color of orange-yellow [he was extremely embarrassed]. His wife said to him: Why is your face sickly? Said he to her: My Rabbis are here and I do not know what to do. His wife, who was even more

righteous than he, said: We have nothing left except the field. Go, sell half of it, and give it to them. They [the Rabbis] prayed for him, saying: May God make good your deficiency!

"After some days he went to plough the half field. The Holy One, blessed by He, gave light to his eyes and the earth broke open and his cow fell and its leg was broken. When he went down to lift it up, he found a treasure under it. He said, my cow's leg was broken, but it turned out to be for my benefit. When our Rabbis came there again, they inquired after him, saying: How is Aba Yudan doing? They [the neighbors] said: He is Aba Yudan of goats, Aba Yudan of donkeys, Aba Yudan of camels.

"When he [Aba Yudan] heard [of the arrival of the Rabbis] he went out to meet them and said to them: Your prayer has produced fruit, and fruit from the fruit. Said they to him: As you live, even though others gave more than you did, we wrote you down at the head [of the list of donors of Tsedakah]. Then they took him and gave him a seat among themselves and they applied to him this verse: A man's gift maketh room for him, and bringeth him before great men (Prov. 18:16)."21

The following story also concerns an overly generous contributor of Tsedakah who receives material rewards. However, he is such a righteous person that he refuses to benefit from his sudden wealth. He wishes to donate his wealth again to the poor.

"Whenever the collectors of Tsedakah saw R. Ele'azar b. Birtah, they would hide themselves from him, because he was in the habit of giving to them all he had. One day he was going to

the market to buy a trousseau for his daughter. When the collectors of Tsedakah saw him, they hid themselves from him. He ran after them and said to them: What is your business? They replied: a male and female orphan. He said to them: I swear, they take priority over my daughter. And he took all that he had and gave it to them.

"He was left with one zuz [a small coin] and with this he bought wheat which he deposited in the granary. When his wife returned home she asked her daughter, What did your father bring home? She said, He has put in the granary all that he had bought. She thereupon went to open the door of the granary and she found that it was so full of wheat that the wheat protruded through the hinges of the door-socket and the door would not open because of this.

"The daughter went to the Beit Ha-Midrash and said to him [her father]: Come and see what your Friend [God] has done for you. Whereupon he said to her, I swear, [the wealth] shall be to you as devoted property, and you shall have no more right to share in it than any poor person in Israel."²²

Another miracle story emphasizes the theme that God rewards an individual according to his deeds. By performing the mitsvah of Tsedakah one will be amply rewarded. The proof text is Job 34:11 which states: For He pays a man according to his actions, And provides for him according to his conduct. "There was once a man who had two sons. One of them did a mitsvah, but the other did not. The one who did a mitsvah sold his house and all that

he possessed to do a mitsvah. Once on the day of Hosha'na [the seventh day of Sukot] his wife gave him ten pulsin [small coins] and said to him, Go, buy something in the market for your children. As soon as he went to the market place, the Tsedakah collectors met him. Said they, Behold, the philanthropist is coming. They then requested him, Give your share in this mitsvah, for we wish to buy a garment for an orphan girl. Thereupon he took the money and gave it to them. But he felt ashamed to go [back] to his wife. What did he do?

"He went to the synagogue, where he saw some of the lulavim carried by the children and the citrons eaten on Hosha'na. He took some of them and filled his sack and sailed away on the Great Sea until he reached a distant land. When he arrived there, it was found that the king was suffering from a bowel complaint. His physicians said to him, If you had one of the citrons that the Jews carry on Hosha'na, you could eat it and be cured. Messengers forthwith went and searched all ships and the whole country, but they found none. They went, however, and found the man lying on his sack. Thereupon they said to him, Have you anything to sell? He replied, I am a poor man, and possess nothing. They then opened his sack and found it full of citrons. They asked him, What are these? He answered, They are citrons that Jews use during the worship service on the day of Hosha'na.

"So they brought him before the king...who ate the citrons and was cured. He [the king] then ordered, Empty his sack and

fill it with denari...Then the king said to him, Make any request, and I shall fulfill it. He replied, I request that my possessions be restored to me and that all the people come forth to meet me. His request was fulfilled. When he reached the harbor, the herald went before him and all the people went forth to meet him, and his brother and his sons also went out to meet him...It thus came about that when he entered his home, he took possession of his own property and inherited that of his brother, in fulfillment of the verse, For He pays according to his actions (Job 34:11)."23

Even of greater significance than the above material rewards are the stories of a sudden, miraculous avoidance of death. This is illustrated in the midrashic commentary upon the verse: Cast your bread upon the waters, For you shall find it after many days (Eccles. 11:1).

"R. Bibi said: If you wish to do Tsedakah, do it upon those who labor in the Torah, because 'the waters' said here are nothing else but the words of the Torah, as it is said: Ho, every one that is thirsty come you for water, and he that does not have money; Come you, buy and eat; Yes, come buy wine and milk without money and without price (Isa. 55:1).

"R. 'Akiva said: When I was travelling at sea, I saw a ship which had sunk, and I was concerned about a Talmid Hakham who had been on board and drowned. When I came to the province of Cappadocia, I noticed him sitting before me and asking questions. I said to him: My son, how did you raise up from the sea? He

said: Rabbi, through your prayer on my behalf one wave tossed me to another, and another to another until they brought me ashore. I said to him: My son, what good deed do you possess? He answered: When I went aboard the ship, a poor man met me and said: Help me!, and I gave him a loaf. He said to me, As you have restored my life to me by your gift, so will your life be restored to you. [R. 'Akiva commented:] For him I have read the verse: Cast your bread upon the waters; For you shall find it after many days (Eccles. 11:1)"24

Still another story about a miraculous rescue at sea has a very similar theme to the above episode.

"A story about a pious man who was habitually charitable. One time he set out in a boat; a wind rose and sank his boat in the sea. Rabbi 'Akiva saw this and came before the court to testify that his wife might remarry. Before he could testify, the man came and stood before him.

"He said to him: Are you not he who drowned in the sea?

"He said: Yes.

"And who raised you out of the sea?

"The Tsedakah which I practiced raised me out of the sea.

"How do you know this?

"He said to him: When I sank to the depths of the sea, I heard the sound of a great noise of the waves of the sea, one wave saying to the other and the other to another: Hurry! and let us raise this man out of the sea, for he practiced Tsedakah all of his days.

"Rabbi 'Akiva explained: Blessed be God, the God of Israel, who has chosen the words of the Torah and the words of the Sages, for the words of the Torah and the words of the Sages are established forever and ever. For it is written: Cast your bread upon the waters, For you shall find it after many days (Eccles. 11:1); furthermore, it is written: Tsedakah delivereth from death (Prov. 10:2)."25

As can be seen, R. 'Akiva frequently plays a key role in these miraculous stories concerning Tsedakah. Evidently R. 'Akiva taught his daughter the value of giving Tsedakah since her life was saved as a result of helping a poor man.

"From R. 'Akiva also [we learn that] there is no planetary influence over Israel. For R. 'Akiva had a daughter. Now Chaldeans [astrologers] told him: On the day that she enters the bridal chamber a snake will bite her and she will die. He was very worried about this. On that day she took a brooch, stuck it into the wall and by chance it sank into the eye of a serpent. The following morning, when she took it out, the snake was trailing after it. What did you do? her father said. She said: A poor man came to our door in the evening and everybody was busy at the banquet, and there was none to listen to him. I took the portion which was given to me and gave it to him. He said to her: You have done a good deed. R. 'Akiva went out and lectured: But Tsedakah delivereth from death (Prov. 10:2)--and not [merely] from an unnatural death, but from death itself."26

The last sentence in the above passage is probably rabbinic hyperbole. Tsedakah cannot bring one immortality; however, it can postpone the inevitable and also can preclude one from a premature death. As an aside, Louis Ginzberg contends that the beggar at the door in the above passage may have been the angel of death.²⁷

F

BENEFITS IN THE WORLD TO COME

The Rabbis were well aware that not all those who gave Tsedakah prospered during their lifetimes and enjoyed good health and long lives. Consequently, it was important to the Rabbis that Tsedakah provide numerous benefits in the afterlife. During one's lifetime one should not concern oneself only with the temporal life; one should also devote one's energies to securing a desirable fate in the World to Come. This attitude is exemplified in the following passage:

"Our Rabbis taught a story of King Monobaz that he dissipated all of his own wealth and the wealth of his fathers in years of scarcity. His brothers and his father's household came in a group to him and said to him: Your father saved money and added [to the treasures] of his fathers, and you dissipated them. He said: My father saved up below and I am saving up above, as it says: Truth springeth out of the earth and Tsedek looketh down from heaven (Ps. 85:12). My fathers stored something which produces no fruits, but I have stored something which does produce fruits, as it says: Say you of the righteous [Tsadik]

that it shall be well with them, for they shall eat of the fruit of their doings (Isa. 3:10). My fathers saved treasures of money, but I have saved treasures of souls, as it says: The fruit of the righteous [Tsadik] is a tree of life, and he that is wise winneth souls (Prov. 11:30). My father gathered for others and I have gathered for myself, as it says: And for thee it shall be Tsedakah (Deut. 24:13). My fathers gathered for this world, but I have gathered for the World to Come, as it says: Your Tsedakah shall go before you, and the glory of the Lord shall be behind you (Isa. 58:8)."28

The Rabbis were extremely concerned about avoiding the judgment of being condemned to Gehinom. Gehinom was reserved for those who failed to atone for their sins, for those who failed to do Teshuvah. To escape from Gehinom was an ample reward for performing Tsedakah.

To reinforce this point, the Rabbis were willing to twist the literal meaning of Scripture. In a difficult passage in which the Hebrew is uncertain, the Rabbis gave the following translation to serve their purposes: Thus saith the Lord, though they be in full strength and likewise many, even so shall they be sheared off, and he shall cross (Nah. 1:12). The interpretation of this verse is as follows:

"If a man sees that his livelihood is insufficient, he should do Tsedakah from it, and all the more so if it is plentiful. What is the meaning of the words, Even so shall they be sheared off and he shall cross? In the school of R. Yishma'el

it was taught: Whoever shears off part of his possessions and does Tsedakah from it, is delivered from the punishment of Gehinom. A simile of two sheep crossing a river, one shorn and the other not shorn; the shorn one gets across, the unshorn one does not. And though I have afflicted thee (Nah. 1:12) -- Mar Zutra said: Even a poor man who himself subsists on Tsedakah should give Tsedakah; I will afflict thee no more (Ibid.)--R. Yosef taught: If he does that, [God] will not again show him signs of poverty."29

By practicing Tsedakah one obtains an advocate in the World to Come. "It is like a man who had some trouble with the king and who had defenders who plead for him to the king. Similarly, when a man fulfills the commandments, and studies the Torah and practices Tsedakah, then while Satan stands accusing him, his defenders stand opposite pointing out his good deeds, as it says: A man's gifts maketh room for him (Prov. 18:16). What he has done for the poor helps towards this; it says: Happy is he that considereth the poor (Ps. 41:2)."30

Consequently, we have that famous verse that is repeated at the time of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kipur: "For R. Yudan said in the name of R. Eli'ezer: Three things annul evil decrees, these are Tefilah [prayer], Tsedakah and Teshuvah [repentance], and the three of them are mentioned in one verse, as it is written: If my people, upon whom My name is called, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their evil ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal

their land (2 Chron. 7:14). And pray, that is prayer; And seek My face, that is Tsedakah, as it is said: I shall behold Thy face in righteousness (Ps. 17:15); And turn from their evil ways, that is repentance."³¹

By performing the mitsvah of Tsedakah one can annul the evil degree that would relegate one to Gehinom. Instead, if God wills it, one may be granted access to Heaven. The Gates of the Righteous, the entryway to Heaven, will be opened to those who have given Tsedakah. In commenting upon the verse, Open the Gate of Righteousness for me (Ps. 118:19) the Rabbis stated: "In the World to Come everyone will be asked, What was your occupation? If the person answers, I used to feed the hungry, they will say to him, This is God's gate; you, who fed the hungry, may enter. I used to give water to those who were thirsty, they will say to him, This is God's gate; you, who gave water to those who were thirsty, may enter. I used to clothe the naked, they will say to him, This is God's gate, you, who clothed the naked, may enter. And similarly with those who raised orphans, and who did Tsedakah, and who performed acts of caring, and loving-kindness."³²

Thus, for the rabbinic mind Tsedakah provided one with an opportunity to gain immortality. One should never underestimate the benefits that one could attain by giving Tsedakah. A sufficiently generous person may enter the World to Come; eternal life may be the ultimate reward of Tsedakah. One who learned this lesson was R. Tarfon.

"It was said of R. Tarfon that he was very wealthy but did not give [sufficient] gifts to the poor. R. 'Akiva once found him and said, My teacher, would you like me to purchase a city or two for you? R. Tarfon replied, Yes, and he immediately gave him four thousand gold denari. R. 'Akiva took the money and distributed it to the poor. A while later, R. Tarfon found him and said, Where are the cities you purchased for me?

"He took him by the hand and brought him to the Beit Ha-Midrash. He then took a copy of the Book of Psalms and placed it in front of them. They read and read, until they came to the verse, He gives freely to the poor, his Tsedakah endureth forever (Ps. 112:9). R. 'Akiva said to him, This is the city I bought for you! R. Tarfon arose and kissed him and said, My teacher, my hero! My teacher in wisdom! My hero in the essences of Life! He then gave him more money to give away."³³

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER III

1. Kohelet Rabah, 4:1,6.
2. Midrash Mishle, 11, p.35a, Buber edition.
3. Bavli, Sukah 49b.
4. Ginzberg, Louis, The Legends of the Jews, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society: 1949, Volume II, p.206.
5. Midrash Tehilim 11:14.
6. Sifre to Deut. Tetse 277.
7. Seder Eliyahu Rabah 11, p.53, Friedmann edition.
8. Rut Rabah 5:4.
9. Bavli, Bava Batra 10a.
10. Rut Rabah 5:9.
11. Ibid.
12. Vayikra Rabah 34:4.
13. Shemot Rabah 31:3.
14. Derekh Eretz Rabah 56a.
15. Bavli, Bava Batra 9b.
16. Derekh Eretz Zutah 4.
17. Bavli, Bava Batra 11a; parallel in Avot de Rabbi Natan, chapter 3, version A, Schechter edition.
18. Pirke deRabbi Eliezer, chapter 34, p.257, Friedlander (trans).
19. Vayikra Rabah 34:1.
20. Bavli, Bava Batra 10a-10b.
21. Vayikra Rabah 5:4.
22. Bavli, Ta'anit 24a.
23. Vayikra Rabah 37:2.
24. Kohelet Rabah 11:1,1.

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER III

25. Avot de Rabbi Natan, chapter 3, version A, Schechter edition.
26. Bavli, Shabat 156b.
27. Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, supra, Vol VI, p.336 in reference to footnote 16.
28. Bavli, Bava Batra 11a.
29. Bavli, Gitin 7a-7b.
30. Shemot Rabah 31:2.
31. Kohelet Rabah 5:1, 6; parallel Pesikta de Rav Kahana 28.
32. Midrash Tehilim 118:17.
33. Masekhet Kalah 51a; parallel Kalah Rabati 52b.

CHAPTER IV

THE PENALTIES OF NOT GIVING TSEDAKAH

Tsedakah, as previously discussed on pages 33-35, has the capacity to bring the donor into a direct relationship with God. Conversely, for those who fail to give Tsedakah the relationship with God is severed. For the rabbinic mind one determinant of the existence of such a close relationship with God was whether or not one's prayers were answered. The Rabbis were well aware that not everyone's prayers were answered. They offered the explanation that those individuals who did not practice Tsedakah were punished by God. He would no longer respond to their prayers. Surely, this is one of the most severe penalties that God could enact.

In analyzing the verse: And money answereth all things (Eccles. 10:19) the Rabbis commented: "R. Yehoshu'a of Sikhnin said in the name of R. Levi: Sometimes a man's prayer is answered, and sometimes it is not. At those times when he used [his money] for Tsedakah he is answered, as it is said, So shall my Tsedakah answer for me (Gen. 30:33); but at those times when he does not use [his money] for Tsedakah, it is used as an accusation against him, as it is written: To testify against him (Deut. 16:19)."1

One prayer that virtually every parent must utter is for the welfare of his children. Yet, if one fails to give Tsedakah that prayer will not be answered. Indeed, the child may be punished for the sin of the parent. This point is illustrated in the sad

story of a daughter of a wealthy man. Her father did not appreciate his social responsibilities as a man of wealth. Consequently, he brought tragedy upon himself and his family.

"Our Rabbis taught: A story of R. Yohanan b. Zakai who was riding on an ass and leaving Jerusalem, while his disciples followed him. He saw a girl picking barley grains in the dung of Arab cattle. When she saw him she wrapped herself in her hair and stood before him. She said to him: Rabbi, support me! He said to her: My daughter, who are you? She said: I am the daughter of Nakdimon b. Gorion.

"He said to her: My daughter, where did the wealth of your father's house go? She said: Is there not a proverb in Jerusalem: The salt of money is diminution? [The preservation of money is enabled by the practice of Tsedakah which temporarily reduces one's wealth but simultaneously acts to preserve it. This interpretation of the above proverb is based upon the final word being Haser, to lessen or decrease.] And some say Hesed. [The preservation of wealth occurs as a result of the performance of benevolent deeds. This interpretation of the above proverb is based upon the final word being Hesed. The text is unclear as to whether the last letter of the word in question is a Resh or a Daled.]

"And where is the wealth of your father-in-law's house? She said: The one came and destroyed the other. [Her father's wealth and that of her father-in-law disappeared simultaneously.] Do you remember, Rabbi, when you signed my Ketubah? He said to his

disciples: I remember that when I signed her Ketubah, I read in it: A million gold denari from her father's house in addition to from her father-in-law's house.

"Raban Yohanan b. Zakai wept and said: How happy are Israel! When they do God's will, no nation and no language has any power over them, but when they do not do God's will, He gives them unto the hands of a low nation, and not only into the hands of a low nation but into the power of the beasts of a low nation.

"Nakdimon b. Gorion did not practice Tsedakah. Was it not taught: It was said of Nakdimon b. Gorion that woolen clothes were spread under his feet when he left his house and the poor followed him and folded them up. If you want, I might answer: He did it for his glorification. And if you want, I might answer: He did not act as he should have done. As people say: The burden is in accordance with the camel."² The greater the strength of the camel, the greater the burden that he may carry. Thus, the greater one's wealth, the greater is one's obligation to perform Tsedakah in a socially responsible manner. In the above story, Nakdimon b. Gorion merely left behind some woolen garments wherever he walked. Given his great wealth this was an insignificant act. Furthermore, it was given in a manner contemptuous of the poor. Subsequently, he lost his fortune and his daughter was reduced to penury.

Extreme poverty was not the only penalty that one could suffer if one ignored the mitsvah of Tsedakah. One could lose one's good health which is an even more precious commodity.

In explicating the verse: I went down into the garden of nuts (Song of Sol. 6:11) the Rabbis made the following analogy concerning Tsedakah. "Just as there are soft nuts, medium nuts, and exceedingly hard nuts, so in Israel there are those who give Tsedakah of their own free will, those who have to be asked before they give, and those who do not give even when asked. R. Levi said: The proverb says: The door that is not opened for good deeds will be opened for the doctor."³ Thus, the failure to give Tsedakah could lead to ill health or even death.

In the above cases the penalty for noncompliance with the commandment of Tsedakah was imposed upon the individual himself who failed to act or upon his immediate family. However, in some instances the community at large could suffer as well. For example, in the agrarian society of ancient Israel rain was a necessity. [In the Shemoneh Esreh there is a special acknowledgement of God's capacity to cause the wind to blow and the rain to fall. This is recited between Sukot and Pesah.] A drought was perceived as a community trauma. What could be the explanation for such a severe punishment by God?

"And R. Yohanan said: Rain is withheld only on account of those who subscribe to Tsedakah in public and do not give it, as it is said, As vapours and wind without rain, So is he that boasteth himself of a false gift (Prov. 25:14)."⁴ In both instances the wind and the braggart act deceitfully and disappoint one's reasonable expectations. In the rabbinic view God imposed a terrible sanction upon a community when an

individual member of said community failed to honor his pledge of Tsedakah. With this perspective there would naturally be tremendous social pressure for each member of a community to keep his commitment in respect to any public statement concerning Tsedakah.

The same point as above is made in the rabbinic explanation of why there was famine in the days of King David. The Rabbis enumerated five sins that were the cause of the rains not falling in the days of David, among them: "Because of the sin of those who publicly subscribe to Tsedakah and do not give it."⁵ In Chapter XI there will be a further discussion of the interrelationship between public vows and Tsedakah.

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER IV

1. Kohelet Rabah 10:1, 19.
2. Bavli, Ketubot 66b-67a.
3. Shir Ha-Shirim Rabah 6:1, 11; parallel in Pesikta Rabati 11, p.42b.
4. Bavli, Ta'anit, 8b.
5. Bamidbar Rabah 8:4.

CHAPTER V

THE ROLE OF TSEDAKAH IN THE COMMUNITY

As can be seen from the preceding chapter the penalty of not giving Tsedakah can impact adversely upon a community. With the same rationale, the practice of Tsedakah can benefit a community. The greatest benefit that a community could receive is that of the physical survival of its youth, without whom it has no future.

A certain community was in anguish over the early demise of its youthful population. The remedy to reverse this pattern was, of course, Tsedakah. "A story of two families of priests who came before Raban Yohanan b. Zakai and said to him: Rabbi, our sons die at the age of eighteen, at the age of fifteen, and even at the age of twelve. He replied: Are you from the family of Eli's descendants to whom it was said, All the increase of thy house shall die young men (1 Sam. 2:33)? They said: Rabbi, what are we to do? He replied: When any son of yours reaches puberty, estimate his worth and then give Tsedakah, keeping in mind the verse: Tsedakah delivereth from death (Prov. 10:2). You will thus save from death a descendant of Eli to whom it was said, All the increase of thy house shall die young men (1 Sam. 2:33). So the families did as they were advised and thus delivered themselves from death."¹

The practice of Tsedakah encouraged the individual to go beyond the self, to have a social awareness, to have compassion and empathy. These values are exemplified in the following

rabbinic typology. "There are four types among men: he that says, What is mine is mine and what is thine is thine - this is the common type, and some say that this is the type of Sodom. Sodom was destroyed not because people committed evil acts but merely because they were indifferent to the suffering of others. He that says, What is mine is thine and what is thine is mine - he is an ignorant man; He that says, What is mine is thine and what is thine is thine own - he is a Hasid; And he that says, What is thine is mine, and what is mine is mine own - he is a wicked man."2

One not only had a social responsibility to others in respect to Tsedakah, one had an affirmative obligation to encourage the practice of Tsedakah among one's neighbors. It was the Rabbis' intention to foster the practice of Tsedakah within a community as can be gleaned from the following quotation. "There are four types of characters who give Tsedakah: One who gives and wants others to give is a Hasid. One who does not give and does not want others to give is a villain. One who gives but does not want others to give has a bad reputation. One who does not give and wants others to give has a bad reputation."3

Thus, Tsedakah should not be practiced in isolation but rather within the context of a community in which all members contribute their respective share. It is a great deed to facilitate the giving of Tsedakah by others. "R. Ele'azar said: He who causes others to do good is greater than the doer, as it

says, And the work of Tsedakah shall be peace, and the effect of Tsedakah quiet and confidence forever (Isa. 32:17)."⁴

In the process of elevating the individual, the practice of Tsedakah has the potential of ennobling the entire community. Tsedakah reaches its greatest potential in the context of a community-wide effort. "What is the meaning of the verse And he put on Tsedakah as a coat of mail (Isa. 59:17)? It tells you that just as in a coat of mail every small scale joins with the others into one piece of armour, so likewise every perutah given to Tsedakah joins with the rest into a large sum. R. Hanina said: From here: And all our Tsedakah is a polluted garment (Isa. 64:5). Just as in a garment every thread joins with the rest into a whole garment, so every perutah given to Tsedakah joins with the rest to form a large sum."⁵

One should never minimize the significance of the act of Tsedakah. Even though one's individual contribution may be small, it nevertheless serves as another thread in a gigantic tapestry. Each human being has the potential of being an artisan in this magnificent work of art: a world in which Tsedakah is universally practiced. Only through the efforts of the community is Tsedakah capable of creating such a masterpiece.

Tsedakah entails communal responsibility. Thus, the Rabbis make the legal inquiry of how long does one need to be a resident in a town before his communal obligations commence. Their answer: "Thirty days to become liable for contributing to the tamhui, three months for the kupah, six months for the clothing

fund, nine months for the burial fund, and twelve months for contributing to the repair of town walls."6

The above paragraph bears two critical words that are essential to comprehending the communal nature of Tsedakah, namely kupah and tamhui. These critical terms are defined in the following paragraph from an essay written by Mordecai M. Kaplan.

"Prescribed methods of collecting and distributing funds are known to have existed even before the destruction of the second Temple in the year 70. Two types of funds in particular survived from that early period almost to our own day. They were known as kupah and tamhui. Kupah was the community chest made up of the weekly money collections. Thence the local poor were provided with their necessities for at least a week's time. Thence too provisions were made for the support of orphan children. When a poor couple was married, the husband would have his rent paid, and the wife would receive her clothing outfit from this kupah. The tamhui consisted of the weekly collections not in money but in kind. That served as a sort of emergency supply for the vagrant poor and also for the resident poor who needed food immediately."7

Kaplan above mentions the special category of orphans. Although they were recipients in the above explanation they could also be compelled to be donors. Virtually no one is exempt from the duty of giving Tsedakah. "Raba levied a contribution for Tsedakah on the house of Bar Merion. Abaye said to him: Has not R. Shmuel b. Yehuda taught that money for Tsedakah is not to be

levied on orphans even for the redemption of captives? - He said: I collect from them in order to give them a better standing."⁸ In this passage it is important to note that Tsedakah could be levied upon individuals to serve the communal needs. Thus, Tsedakah should not be construed as a purely voluntary act by an individual. The price of being a member of a community included the payment of Tsedakah. Furthermore, note that Rabah's justification for levying Tsedakah upon even the orphans was to elevate their social status. If one failed to give Tsedakah, irrespective of the amount, one had little social standing.

As explained earlier, pages 36-38, Tsedakah has the unique capacity to elevate the donor as well as the recipient. Without having the ability to give Tsedakah one's self-respect may be diminished. Consequently, even the poor should give Tsedakah. "Mar Zutra said: Even a poor man who himself subsists on Tsedakah should give Tsedakah."⁹

Tsedakah was an essential and integral part of the Jewish life in a community. In some small Jewish communities there was not a sufficient number of Jews to effectively practice Tsedakah. In such an isolated enclave Jewish scholars were prohibited from residing. "It has been taught: A scholar should not reside in a city where the following ten things are not found: A Beit Din that imposes flagellation and decrees penalties; a kupah collected by two and distributed by three; a synagogue; a public toilet; a circumciser; a surgeon; an artist versed in calligraphy; a ritual slaughterer and a teacher."¹⁰ Although the

above list may not have been written in order of importance it is interesting to note that kupah was written even before synagogue.

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER V

1. Seder Eliyahu Rabah 11, p.53, Friedmann edition.
2. Avot de Rabbi Natan, chapter 40, version A, Schechter edition.
3. Avot de Rabbi Natan, chapter 45, version B, Schechter edition.
4. Bavli, Bava Batra 9a.
5. Bavli, Bava Batra 9b.
6. Bavli, Bava Batra 8a.
7. Kaplan, Mordecai M. "Jewish Philanthropy: Traditional and Modern" in: Farris, E., Laune, F., and Todd, A. [eds.] Intelligent Philanthropy. Chicago 1930: pp.52-89; 59.
8. Bavli, Bava Batra 8a.
9. Bavli, Gitin 7b.
10. Bavli, Sanhedrin 17b.

CHAPTER VI
THE URGENCY OF GIVING TSEDAKAH

Most mitsvot should be done at the earliest possible opportunity. For example, the mitsvah of a brit milah is traditionally performed early in the morning on the eighth day. This principle is especially true in respect to the practice of Tsedakah. Poverty, as was earlier discussed in Chapter II, was omnipresent during the rabbinic age. The Rabbis were fully aware that the prompt performance of Tsedakah could result in the saving of human life.

Nevertheless, a rabbinic debate was held as to whether or not an investigation should be conducted prior to the distribution of either food or clothing. Perhaps, since both commodities were in short supply the Rabbis were concerned about inadvertently giving Tsedakah to an undeserving donee. This point will be explored in Chapter XVI. In any event, the Rabbis divided themselves into two schools of thought about the necessity of a prior investigation in respect to giving away food and clothing. One school of thought held that an investigation should be conducted concerning food distribution and not in respect to the giving of clothing. Not surprisingly, the other school of thought had the converse position.

One scriptural verse that was utilized for rabbinic analysis was Isa. 58:7 which states: It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin. In

respect to the second clause in the above verse "R. Ada bar Ahavah and R. Yohanan held differing views. One says, in regard to clothing, the applicant is investigated carefully but not in regard to food. The wise say that also in regard to clothing there should be no investigation, on account of the Covenant of Abraham. [The presence or absence of evidence of circumcision should not be exposed.] And not to ignore your own kin (ibid.), Bar Kapara said you must regard the poor man's flesh as if it were your own."¹

The Rabbis have an almost infinite capacity to see many aspects of the same issue. For example, R. Huna is sensitive to the fact that naked people or those in rags are subject to contempt and that hunger is usually not as visible as nakedness. Using this rationale, he argues that clothing should be distributed immediately while questions may be asked in regard to those claiming to be hungry. However, R. Yudah contends that those without food are actually suffering while those without clothing are not in such acute distress.² Although the above debate did not resolve the issue, it demonstrates that the urgency of giving Tsedakah sometimes resulted in the elimination of even a cursory examination of the individual seeking assistance.

Another concern of the Rabbis was whether one should give Tsedakah in the form of money or in kind. The problem with giving money was that it would not lead to instant relief to the poor. The money had to be converted into actual necessities that

were craved by the destitute. For example, "A wife stays at home and gives bread to the poor which they can at once enjoy whilst I give them money which they cannot at once enjoy."3

A delay in giving Tsedakah, even for an instance, may be the difference between life and death. This is tragically depicted in the explanation of the many calamities in the life of Nahum of Gamzu. "A story of Nahum of Gamzu who was blind in both eyes, his two hands and legs were amputated, and his whole body was covered with boils and he was lying in a dilapidated house on a bed the feet of which were standing in bowls of water in order to prevent the ants from crawling on to him...

"And his disciples said to him, Rabbi, since you are wholly righteous, why has all this come upon you? and he said, I have brought it all on myself. Once I was journeying on the road and was traveling for the house of my father-in-law and I had with me three asses, one laden with food, one with drink, and one with all kinds of delicacies, when a poor man approached me and stopped me on the road and said to me, Master, give me something to eat. I replied to him, Wait until I have unloaded something from the ass; I had hardly unloaded something from the ass when the man died from hunger. I then went and laid myself on him and exclaimed, May my eyes which had no pity upon your eyes become blind, May my hands which had no pity upon your hands be cut off, May my legs which had no pity upon your legs be amputated, and my mind was not at rest until I added, May my whole body be covered with boils. His students declared, Alas! that we see you in such

a sore plight. To this he said, Woe would it be to me did you not see me in such a sore plight."⁴

Another consideration of the Rabbis was the urgency of life itself. Each one of us has only a finite existence upon the earth. We should number our days wisely by devoting our lives to the performance of mitsvot, especially that of giving Tsedakah.

"It was further taught, R. Shim'on b. Ele'azar said: Do justice and Tsedakah whilst you can find a recipient of your Tsedakah, have the opportunity, and it is yet in your power. Solomon in his wisdom said: Remember then your Creator in the days of your youth, Before the evil days come (Eccles. 12:1) - this refers to the days of old age; And the years draw nigh, when you shall say: I have no pleasure in them (ibid.) - this refers to the Messianic era, wherein there is neither merit nor guilt."⁵

Since life is precarious, uncertain and of short duration there is an urgency to life itself. The giving of Tsedakah should not be deferred to a later date since the opportunity to perform Tsedakah may not be possible at that time.

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER VI

1. Vayikra Rabah 34:14, Romm edition.
2. Bavli, Bava Batra 9a.
3. Bavli, Ta'anit 23b.
4. Bavli, Ta'anit 21a.
5. Bavli, Shabat 151b.

CHAPTER VII

GIVING TSEDAKAH DISCREETLY OR INDIRECTLY

On page 32 of this thesis the following two sentences were written: "Furthermore, in addition to the above restrictions, the quality of the reward is dependent upon how the act of Tsedakah was performed. For example, if Tsedakah is given discreetly the reward would be much greater than if the Tsedakah was given indiscreetly." For the rabbinic mind an indiscreet act of Tsedakah virtually nullified the mitsvah of performing Tsedakah. Discretion was essential in order not to embarrass the recipient. It should be noted that most Jewish communities during the rabbinic period were small enough that virtually all Jews knew one another within the community. To avoid embarrassing the donee it was preferable to give the Tsedakah anonymously in order that the recipient would not be humbled in the presence of his benefactor. Ideally, the poor individual could walk in dignity among his townspeople and never know who among them was assisting him with the necessities of life. However, human curiosity would on occasion interfere with the above idealistic paradigm.

"Mar 'Ukba had a poor man in his neighborhood for whom he used to throw every day four zuz upon his door-step. One day he [the poor individual] said: I shall go and see who does this good act for me. On the same day it occurred that Mar 'Ukba was late in the Beit Midrash and his wife came home with him. When the poor man saw them he went after them, but they ran away from him into a furnace, from which the fire had just been extinguished.

Mar 'Ukba's feet were burning and his wife spoke to him: Raise your feet and put them on mine...And what is [the reason for] all this? Because Mar Zutra b. Tuviah said in the name of Rav...It is more becoming for a man that he throws himself into a fiery furnace then publicly put his neighbor to shame. From where do we derive this? From Tamar, for it is written, When she was brought forth (Gen. 38:25)."¹

In order to understand the above biblical citation it is necessary to read Gen. 38:24-25: And it came to pass about three months after, that it was told Judah, saying: Tamar thy daughter-in-law hath played the harlot and moreover, behold, she is with child by harlotry. And Judah said: Bring her forth, and let her be burnt. When she was brought forth, she sent to her father-in-law, saying: By the man, whose these are, am I with child, and she said: Discern, I pray thee, whose are these, the signet, the cords, and the staff. The Rabbis interpreted this passage as a decision by Tamar to be burned to death rather than to publicly humiliate her father-in-law by disclosing their sexual tryst. In order to avoid shaming Judah she sent him a private message. Only through Judah's public acknowledgement of their liaison was Tamar saved (Gen. 38:26). From the above rabbinical understanding of the Tamar story Mar Zutra extrapolated that it was better to die a fiery death than to embarrass a recipient of Tsedakah.

In similar rabbinic hyperbole is the following text which emphasizes the importance of discrete Tsedakah. "R. Ele'azar

said: A man who gives Tsedakah in secret is greater than Moses our Teacher, for of Moses it is written, For I was in dread of the anger and the hot displeasure (Deut. 9:19) and of the one who gives Tsedakah [secretly] it is written, A gift in secret pacifieth anger (Prov. 21:14)."² By inference, the Rabbis reasoned that since a secret gift can subdue anger, the one who practices discreet Tsedakah is even more powerful than Moses who was incapable of subduing God's fierce wrath.

For the Rabbis, every human action, whether overt or covert, was constantly being monitored by God. One could not escape the purview of God as acknowledged in the following biblical verse: For God shall bring every work into the judgment concerning every hidden thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil (Eccles. 12:14). In commenting upon the last clause in the above verse "The School of R. Yanai said: This refers to one who gives alms to a poor man publicly [an apparent good deed which is really evil] like [the story] of R. Yanai. He saw a man give a zuz to a poor person publicly, so he said to him: It had been better that you had not given him, than that you have given him publicly and put him to shame. The School of R. Shila said: This refers to one who gives alms to a woman secretly, for he brings her into suspicion."³

Thus, we see the subtle sensitivity of the Rabbis. Not every secret act of Tsedakah is meritorious. The vivid imagination of the Rabbis construed a hypothetical situation in which the secret performance of Tsedakah could conceivably

embarrass the recipient. If discovered, the woman who had been secretly receiving the money from a man may be deemed to be a prostitute in the eyes of her neighbors. Whether to give Tsedakah publicly or in secret depends upon the particular circumstances of the individual case.

However, the general preference of the Rabbis is in favor of secret Tsedakah. It is more appropriate for certain human conduct to be performed in a modest, private setting. What activity could be more private than human sexuality? The erotic poetry of The Song of Solomon had to be interpreted on a more spiritual plane. For example, the following passage was construed as supporting discreet Tsedakah: How beautiful are thy steps in sandals, O prince's daughter! The roundings of thy thighs are like the links of a chain, The work of the hands of a skilled workman (The Song of Sol. 7:2). The phrase the roundings of thy thighs denotes something that should only be seen by one's lover. Similarly, Tsedakah should only be seen by God.⁴

Parallel to the concept of giving Tsedakah discreetly is the concept of giving Tsedakah indirectly. For example, one could enable individuals to escape from the humiliation of receiving Tsedakah publicly. This was the common fate of orphans. By raising the orphan in one's home one could still practice Tsedakah but in an indirect manner. This is illustrated in the following text: Happy are they that keep justice, That do Tsedakah at all times (Ps. 106:3). "R. Shmuel b. Nahmani said:

This refers to a man who brings up an orphan boy or orphan girl in his house and enables them to marry."5

Another indirect approach to Tsedakah would be to convert an event into an act of Tsedakah even though that was not the original intent of the parties. "One day Abaye sent to him [Aba the Cupper] two scholars in order to test him. He received them and gave them food and drink and in the evening he prepared woolen mattresses for them [to sleep on]. In the morning the scholars rolled these together and took them to the market [for sale]. There they met him [Aba the Cupper] and they said to him, Sir, value these, how much are they worth? And he replied, So-and-so much. They said to him, Perhaps they are worth more? He replied, This is what I paid for them. They then said to him, They are yours, we took them away from you, tell us, pray, of what did you suspect us. He replied, I said to myself, perhaps the Rabbis needed money to redeem captives and they were ashamed to tell me. They replied, Sir, take them back. He answered, From the moment I missed them, I dismissed them from my mind and [I gave them] to Tsedakah."6

Another method of indirect Tsedakah was that of honorable deception. The donor deceives the recipient in order to avoid embarrassing him. The donee is not aware that he is receiving Tsedakah. "R. Yonah said: It is not written 'Happy is he that giveth to the poor' but Happy is he that considereth the poor (Ps. 41:1) [which means] how to benefit him. R. Yonah, when he saw a person from an honorable family who had lost his money and

was ashamed to take Tsedakah, used to go to him and say to him: As I have heard that you have come into an inheritance in a city abroad, I offer you this thing, and when you have some income you will give it back to me. At the same time when he gave it to him, he would say to him: I have given it to you as a gift. R. Levi in the name of R. Hama son of R. Hanina said: happy is written twenty-two times [in conjunction with some meritorious deed] and compensation is only mentioned in one instance. What compensation is offered: Happy is he that considereth the poor, The Lord will deliver him in the day of evil (Ps. 41:1)."7

In the above text there are two techniques in the art of honorable deception in the giving of Tsedakah, one was the "loan" and the other was the "gift". The Rabbis debated among themselves as to whether the donee should first be approached in terms of a loan or of a gift. "Our Rabbis taught: [If a man] has nothing and does not want to be supported [by Tsedakah] he should be given it [the money] as a loan and then it is given to him as a gift - according to R. Meir. And the Sages say: It is given to him as a gift and then it is given to him as a loan."8 The Rabbis were aware that some individuals have too much pride to accept "gifts"; by characterizing the transaction as a "loan" the donee may not be so reluctant to accept the indirect Tsedakah. Either alternative had the identical objective, namely, to give Tsedakah in an indirect manner so as not to embarrass the recipient.

Another ingenious form of honorable deception in the practice of Tsedakah is illustrated in the following story. "R. Shim'on b. Lakish went to Bozrah. There [he found] a man called Aba Yudan the Deceiver; not that he was, Heaven forbid, a dishonest man, but rather because he was cunning in mitsvot; for after all people had contributed, he contributed as much as all of them put together. R. Shim'on b. Lakish took him and gave him a seat next to himself. The verse, A man's gifts maketh room for him, And bringeth him before great men (Prov. 18:16) was applied to him [Aba Yudan the Deceiver]."9

The trick of Aba Yudan in the above story was that while others were contributing Tsedakah Aba refrained. The others were concerned that without the financial contributions of Aba the Tsedakah fund would be insufficient. Consequently, they gave more than they otherwise would have done to make up for Aba's deficiency. Then, after all the others had given to their absolute limit, Aba would match the entire sum. The text is unclear as to whether he would give his Tsedakah secretly. However, he probably could not have performed the above trick too many times in public while still retaining the title "Aba Yudan the Deceiver".

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER VII

1. Bavli, Ketubot 67b.
2. Bavli, Bava Batra 9b.
3. Bavli, Hagigah 5a; parallel in Kohelet Rabah 12:1, 14.
4. Bavli, Mo'ed Katan 16b.
5. Bavli, Ketubot 50a.
6. Bavli, Ta'anit 21b-22a.
7. Vayikra Rabah 34:1; see also Midrash Tehilim 41:3.
8. Bavli, Ketubot 67b.
9. Vayikra Rabah 5:4.

CHAPTER VIII

RULES EFFECTING THE DONOR OF TSEDAKAH

In the realm of Tsedakah certain expectations, obligations and restrictions were applicable to the donor. The most significant expectation that was placed upon the donor was that the Tsedakah given to the donee was suitable for his particular, unique needs. For example, if a family was in danger of starvation, giving them clothing would not be an appropriate expression of Tsedakah. It was incumbent upon the donor to investigate the circumstances of the prospective donee to determine what were his paramount needs. Of course, in an obvious or in an urgent situation one should dispense with the necessity of a careful investigation. In short, one should give wisely and with sensitivity.

The duty of the donor to satisfy the particular needs of each donee is illustrated by the rabbinic commentary to the following biblical verse: For the poor shall never cease out of the land; therefore I command thee, saying: Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor and to thy needy (Deut. 15:11). The Rabbis were curious as to why three categories were listed in the above verse. Their explanation: "Who is worthy of bread is given bread, who is worthy of an 'isa' is given an 'isa' [a certain amount of flour], who is worthy of a coin, is given a coin, who is worthy to be fed in his mouth, is fed in his mouth."¹

Another biblical passage in the same chapter also was utilized by the Rabbis to discuss the obligations of the donor to meet the needs of the donee: If there be among you a needy man, one of thy brethren, within any of thy gates, in thy land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thy heart, nor shut thy hand from thy needy brother; but thou shalt surely open thy hand unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need in that which he wanted (Deut. 15:7-8). The Rabbis analyzed this verse to determine how they should implement Tsedakah.

For example, if an orphan who was reliant upon Tsedakah expressed a desire to marry, the community should respond by 1) renting a house for him, 2) preparing a bed for him, 3) supplying him with household furnishings and 4) finding him a wife for marriage. "For it is written, Sufficient for his need in that which he wanteth (Deut. 15:8): Sufficient for his need refers to a bed and a table; He refers to a wife, for it is written: And the Lord God said: It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help mate for him (Gen. 2:18)."2

The issue arises in respect to the above text, What does the word "sufficient" mean? What is the extent of the obligation of the donor to satisfy the requirement? "Our Rabbis taught: Sufficient for his need (Deut. 15:8) -- you are commanded to support him, but you are not commanded to make him rich. In that which he wanteth (ibid.) -- even a riding horse and a slave to

run before him. It was told about Hillel the Elder that he bought a horse for a poor man from a good family, a riding-horse and a slave to run before him. Once he did not find a slave to run before him, so he ran before him for three miles."³

Thus the Rabbis required the donor to be cognizant of the economic circumstances of the donee before his recent misfortune drastically reduced his standard of living. It was the rabbinic objective that, if possible, the donor should assist the recipient in matching his previous standard of living. Otherwise, it would be too humiliating for a formerly wealthy individual to live as a beggar. (This obligation sometimes fell upon an entire community.) A small town in the Upper Galilee bought meat every day for a poor man who was from a good family. The meat was fowl and was quite an expense for the community. Nevertheless, it was perceived as a communal responsibility to enable this previously prosperous individual to live with some semblance of dignity.⁴

Another example of this expectation placed upon the donor: "A man once came to Raba. He said, What do you eat for meals? He said, Of fat chicken and old wine. He said, Do you not think of the burden upon the community? He said, Do I eat of theirs? I eat of the All-Merciful, for we have learnt: The eyes of all wait for Thee, And Thou givest them their food in his season (Ps. 145:15). Thus, since it is not said "in their season" but "in his season", it teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, provides for every individual his food in accordance with his own

habits. In the meantime Raba's sister who had not seen him for thirteen years had come and brought him a fat chicken and old wine. He said, What a coincidence! And he said to him, I humble myself, come and eat."5

In addition to the prior economic circumstances of the recipient it is imperative to consider the present situation of the donee. Is he in transit? Is it Shabat? For how long will the donee be in town? The rabbinic response: "But surely we have learnt: One does not give less than a loaf [sufficient for two meals]...to a poor man travelling from place to place. If necessary, he must be supported when spending the night; while if he spends Shabat, he must be given food for three meals...For example if he has one meal with him, we say to him, Eat that which you have with you. And when he leaves, shall he depart empty-handed? [No!] We provide him with a meal. What is meant by supporting someone for the night? R. Papa said: A bed and a pillow."6

From the above examples, it is evident that it was incumbent upon the donor to carefully determine how to best serve the particular needs of the prospective donee. Merely giving Tsedakah was not sufficient, one should give wisely. This would include giving the proper amount in an appropriate manner. This responsibility in respect to Tsedakah was commented upon by R. Yonah who said: "It is not written "Happy is the one who gives to the poor," but rather, Happy is the one who considereth [maskil] the poor (Ps. 41:2) -- which means consider how to benefit him."7

According to R. Yonah maskil in the above verse indicates that the donor is required to use his insight when giving Tsedakah.

An additional obligation imposed upon the donor was that he give the Tsedakah in a humble manner. If he was patronizing or condescending, he would probably humiliate the donee. This would be a terrible injustice (see page 29). Humility was highly valued in the context of giving Tsedakah as set forth in the following passage.

"Teach the members of your house humility. For when one is humble and the members of his household are humble, if a poor man comes and stands in the doorway of the master of the house and inquires of them, Is your father within? they answer, Yes, come in, enter. Even before he has entered, a table is set for him. When he enters and eats and drinks and offers a blessing up to Heaven, great delight of spirit is given to the master of the house.

"But when one is not humble and the members of his household are impatient, if a poor man comes and stands in the doorway and inquires of them, Is your father within? they answer, No! and rebuke him and drive him off in anger."8 Thus it can be seen that the Rabbis greatly esteemed the attribute of humility and considered this attitude to be obligatory upon the donor of Tsedakah.

Besides the above expectations and obligations placed upon the donor, there is a basic restriction: the donor must limit the amount of his Tsedakah so that he himself does not create the

possibility that he will be in need of Tsedakah. As demonstrated on pages 41-45, there were overly-generous contributors of Tsedakah who in their zeal impoverished their own families. A mathematical limit had to be set so that one would have a guideline as to the extent of one's obligation. The Rabbis debated whether that limit should be a tenth of one's wealth or a fifth.

"R. El'ai stated: It was decided at Usha that if a man wished to spend liberally he should not spend more than a fifth. So it was also taught: If a man desires to spend liberally [for Tsedakah] he should not spend more than a fifth [of his wealth], because he might himself come to be in need [of Tsedakah] from people...Where [is this found in Scripture]? And of all that Thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto Thee (Gen. 28:22). But the second tenth, surely, is not like the first one? - R. Ashi replied: I will...give a tenth of it [implies I will give] the second [tenth] like the first [tenth]."9 If one examines the above verse in Hebrew one will note that the verb "to give a tenth" is repeated. The Rabbis contended that since the verb is repeated that indicated one could give as much as two-tenths or one fifth of one's wealth for Tsedakah.

However, there was an exception to the above maximum of one fifth of one's wealth. If the donor was dying there would no longer be the possibility of his jeopardizing his own financial future. Consequently, there is the "deathbed exception". "When [Mar 'Ukba's] soul was about to depart he said, Bring me the

Tsedakah account. When he found that 7,000 siyan [gold] denari were entered on his account, he said, The provisions are poor and the road is long. And he arose and distributed half of his wealth. But how could this be? Has not R. El'ai said, It was decided at Usha that if a man wished to spend liberally he should not spend more than a fifth? This refers only to a man's lifetime, since he might become impoverished, but after death this does not matter."10

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER VIII

1. Sifre Deut., Reeh 118.
2. Bavli, Ketubot 67b.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Bavli, Shabat 118a.
7. Vayikra Rabah 34:1; parallel Yerushalmi, Peah 8:8.
8. Avot de Rabbi Natan, chapter 7, version A, Schechter edition.
9. Bavli, Ketubot 50a.
10. Bavli, Ketubot 67b.

CHAPTER IX
ALMS COLLECTORS

It soon became apparent that every needy donee could not readily find an available and willing donor to assist the donee in his particular circumstances. In order for the system of Tsedakah to function within a community there had to be some individuals who acted as liaisons between the donors and the donees. These individuals, known as alms collectors, acted in a dual capacity; they both collected and distributed Tsedakah. They had a difficult and demanding position within the community. In some respects the role of collecting Tsedakah was not as difficult as distributing Tsedakah. "R. Yose said: May my lot be of those who collect Tsedakah, but not of those who distribute Tsedakah."1

What concerned R. Yose was that in the role of collecting Tsedakah one could act with impartiality. Everyone was obligated to give and one generally did not have to engage in fine moral distinctions in respect to accepting their contributions. However, moral dilemmas were presented in the act of distribution. There usually was not sufficient Tsedakah to meet the needs of the poor. One had to select certain individuals to receive Tsedakah and reject others. One had to apportion the Tsedakah in a fair and equitable manner without permitting one's personal preferences to interfere with the demands of justice.

Alms collectors were generally esteemed within the community. They were perceived by some Rabbis as providing moral

and spiritual leadership to the community. This is illustrated by the comment on the following verse: And they that lead the many to righteousness will be like the stars for ever and ever (Dan. 12:3). These are the Tsedakah collectors."2

One measure of community esteem and the status of a profession is the willingness of parents to allow their children to marry members of that profession. "All whose fathers are known to have held office as public officers or alms collectors may marry into the priestly class and none need trace their descent."3 To marry into the priestly class was to gain entry into the highest stratum of society. Furthermore, one did not have to go through the embarrassment of providing one's family genealogy.

Within the typical Jewish community there was a hierarchy of values as demonstrated by the priorities of suitable spouses for one's sons. Alms collectors were within the hierarchy but certainly not at the top. "Our Rabbis taught: Let a man always sell all he has and marry the daughter of a scholar. If he does not find the daughter of a scholar, let him marry the daughter of the honorable men of the generation [probably the civic leaders of the Jewish community]. If he does not find the daughter of the honorable men of the generation, let him marry the daughter of the head of the synagogues. If he does not find the daughter of the head of the synagogues, let him marry the daughter of a Tsedakah treasurer. If he does not find the daughter of a Tsedakah treasurer, let him marry the daughter of an elementary

school-teacher, but let him not marry the daughter of an am ha-arets [an ignorant, illiterate person]..."⁴

One reason that alms collectors were not universally popular was that they had the unpleasant task of quarrelling with the members of the community who did not pay their share of compulsory Tsedakah. This was the rabbinic explanation of why the Mishnah raised the issue of whether alms collectors may marry into the priesthood.⁵

Alms collectors had to be concerned with marit 'ayin, their appearance to others within the community. Their conduct had to be above suspicion; they could not give the appearance that they possibly may be misappropriating the Tsedakah funds which they collected. The Rabbis established certain standards of conduct to assure that the alms collectors would not be compromised. "Our Rabbis taught: The collectors of Tsedakah are not permitted to separate from one another, but one may [temporarily] separate himself [in order to collect] at the gate while [the other collects] at a shop. If one of them finds money in the market, he should not put it into his purse but into the kupah and when he comes home he should take it out. In the same way, if one of them has lent a man a minah and he pays him in the market, he should not put the money into his own purse but into the kupah and take it out again when he comes home...If the stewards of the tamhui still have food and no poor to whom to distribute it, they may sell it to others but not to themselves. In counting out the money collected for Tsedakah, they should not count the coins two

at a time, but only one at a time [people may think that they are counting one coin for every two received]."6

The Rabbis were aware that the system of Tsedakah within the community was dependent upon the assumption that the alms collectors were collecting and distributing the Tsedakah funds in an honorable manner. This entire structure could collapse if that assumption was undermined by inappropriate or suspicious conduct on the part of the alms collectors.

Furthermore, the Rabbis enacted certain procedural rules as to the mechanics of Tsedakah collection and distribution. "Our Rabbis taught: The Tsedakah fund is collected by two person and distributed by three. It is collected by two, because any office conferring authority over the community must be filled by at least two [persons]. It must be distributed by three, on the analogy of money cases [which are adjudicated by a Beit Din comprised of three judges]. Food for the tamhui is collected by three and distributed by three, since it is distributed as soon as it is collected. Food is distributed every day, the kupah every 'Erev Shabat. The tamhui is for all visitors, the kupah is for the poor of the community only."7

The reason why Tsedakah funds must be distributed by three individuals is that like a Beit Din the collectors may have to adjudicate the allocation of Tsedakah among competing claimants. Food is collected by three and distributed by three since the food is dispersed immediately. Any delay could result in a spoilage of the perishable food.

Ultimately the system of Tsedakah collection was dependent upon the integrity of the individual alms collector. A donor should be careful that he give his Tsedakah to an alms collector of integrity. "A man should not put a perutah into the kupah unless it is under the supervision of a man like R. Hanina b. Teradion" [who was known to be very reliable].⁸

A great deal of discretion was placed in the hands of the alms collectors. One issue confronted by them was whether the funds collected should be dispersed for the benefit of the inhabitants of the local community or whether the funds could be given to the poor from other communities. Should the alms collectors have two purses, one for each purpose? Should conditions be placed upon the alms collectors to limit their options? R. Ashi reacted negatively to this idea and stated: "I do not need to have conditions, since whoever comes [to give me money for Tsedakah] relies upon my judgment, and leaves it to me to give to whom I will."⁹

Given this great amount of trust that was placed in the alms collectors the Rabbis did not require them to provide an accounting of the dispersal of the funds. The Rabbis could not find a biblical text directly supporting this position; however, they did cite the following as a partial justification. They reckoned not with the men into whose hand they delivered the money, to give to them that did the work, for they dealt faithfully (2 Kings 12:16).¹⁰

Tsedakah funds would on occasion be collected for a particular purpose. It was the responsibility of each alms collector to honor the original intent of the donor. For example, R. Yose b. Kismal mistakenly confused the Purim-money for ordinary Tsedakah funds. To correct his error he gave his own funds to the poor at Purim since he had already distributed the money that he had accepted for this purpose.¹¹

In an era in which men made all significant financial decisions, women were not deemed competent to make substantial contributions of Tsedakah. Consequently, the alms collectors were limited to accepting only small donations from women. "Small donations" is a term dependent upon the relative wealth of the women. "Ravina came once to the city of Maḥuza. The housewives of Maḥuza came and threw before him chains and bracelets, which he accepted from them [for Tsedakah]. Said Rabah Tosfaah to Ravina: Was it not taught: Alms collectors may accept from them small donations but not big amounts? He, however, said to him: These things are considered with the people of Maḥuza as small amounts."¹²

Alms collectors were capable of pressing people to give Tsedakah beyond their limits. If they forcibly demanded contributions in an amount in excess of what the donors could reasonably afford the alms collectors themselves were inviting divine retribution. And I will punish all that oppress them (Jer. 30:20), "even collectors of Tsedakah..."¹³

One aspect of the genius of the rabbinic mind was its ingenious capacity to make fine distinctions. The above potential punishment for Tsedakah collectors was too sweeping for some Rabbis and thus they modified the statement. The qualification set forth below demonstrates the unique value that the study of Torah had within the Jewish community.

"R. Berekhiah and R. Hiya, his father, opened their discourse in the name of R. Yose, bar R. Nehorai: It is written I will punish all that oppress (Jer. 30:20), [this applies] even to collectors of Tsedakah. But it does not apply to those who collect money in behalf of teachers of Mishnah and teachers of Bible, payment which the teachers of Mishnah and the teachers of Bible merit because they do not labor at some other employment in their own behalf. As to compensation for teaching even one word in the Torah, for such teaching no human being can give adequate compensation."¹⁴

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER IX

1. Bavli, Shabat 118b.
2. Bavli, Bava Batra 8b.
3. Mishnah, Kidushin 4:5.
4. Bavli, Pesahim 49b.
5. Bavli, Kidushin 76b.
6. Bavli, Bava Batra 8b; similar passage in Bavli, Pesahim 13a.
7. Ibid.
8. Bavli, Bava Batra 10b; parallel Kalah 51a-51b.
9. Bavli, Bava Batra 9a.
10. Ibid.
11. Bavli, 'Avodah Zarah 17b; similar passage in Kalah Rabati 52b.
12. Bavli, Bava Kama 119a.
13. Vayikra Rabah 30:1.
14. Pesikta de Rav Kahana 28, p.178a, Buber edition.

CHAPTER X

THE PRIORITIES IN GIVING TSEDAKAH

Prior to any discussion of the priorities in giving Tsedakah it should be noted that no consistent hierarchy can be drawn from the scattered rabbinic sources that mention this topic. Different texts provide different lists of priorities. Nevertheless, these few rabbinic texts were later utilized by the codifiers as prooftexts for their elaborate codes listing a hierarchy of Tsedakah.¹

Before commencing with any rabbinic sources as to how one should allocate Tsedakah, we must first confront the question: suppose one does not have anything to give? Any list of priorities in giving Tsedakah assumes that one is in a position to distribute some wealth and furthermore, that one needs to make a choice in regard to this distribution. This assumption may not be valid for those individuals who are not in a position to give. One applicable biblical verse is And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, And satisfy the afflicted soul; Then shall thy light rise in darkness, And thy gloom be as the noonday (Isa. 58:10). Relying on this verse, "R. Levi said, if you have nothing to give him, console him with words, speak to him: My soul goes forth to you, for I have nothing to give to you."² Thus, even if one has nothing to give one should devote one's efforts to comforting the soul of the suppliant for Tsedakah. Words of kindness, warmth and empathy may do more to raise the spirits of the afflicted soul than a few meager coins. (Nevertheless, the above passage

is inconsistent with Bavli, Gitin 7b which has the statement of Mar Zutra that "Even a poor man who himself subsists on Tsedakah should give Tsedakah" (see page 65).

Assuming that one has something of substance to give, how should it be dispersed? One rabbinic response is that we are obligated to honor God first with any substance that we may have. This is from the verse, Honor the Lord with thy substance, And with the first-fruits of all thine increase (Prov. 3:9). "How is one to honor Him with one's substance? One sets aside gleanings, the over-looked sheaves and peah; the first tithe, the second tithe and the hallah [the priest's share of dough]. One makes a shofar, a sukah and a lulav; one feeds the hungry and gives drink to the thirsty and clothes the naked. If you have substance, you are obliged to do all of these, but if you have no substance, you are not obliged to do any of them. But if you are engaged in honoring your father and your mother, what is written? Honor thy father and thy mother (Exod. 20:12). Even if you have to walk around [and beg] at doorways."³

The above passage lists a variety of obligations assuming that one has the substance to comply with these mitsvot. It concurs with the text on the previous page that one who is without "substance" is relieved from the responsibility of giving Tsedakah. The one exception to this rule is that of honoring one's parents. According to this text, one has no excuse if one's parents are in want. Even if one has nothing, one must

literally beg from door to door in order to give something of substance to one's parents.

Parents are given first priority in regard to allocation of Tsedakah in various rabbinic texts. An example is the following commentary on this biblical verse: Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him, And that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? (Isa. 58:7). "So, if a man has many provisions in his house and wishes to do Tsedakah, where should he start? First, he should support his father and his mother. If he has something left, he should support his brother and his sister. If he still has something left, he should support the members of his household. If he has something else left, he should support members of his family. Then, if he has something left, he should support people in his neighborhood. Next, if he has something left, he should support the people on his street. And finally, he should provide Tsedakah to Israel."⁴

The above text describes a concentric circle of obligations. At the center, of primary responsibility, is the support of one's parents. At the periphery are the people of Israel. Note that on this diagram Gentiles are not even included.

The primary obligation of providing for one's parents is further illustrated by the following text. Again the biblical referent is Isa. 58:7: When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him. "When the Holy One - may His great name be blessed for ever and ever and ever! - saw Adam naked, He did not wait an hour but

clothed him at once, as it is said, And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife [garments of skins, and clothed them] (Gen. 3:21). Similarly, a man seeing his father and his mother standing in shabby garments should not turn his face away, but should clothe them in nice garments. If he himself wears clothing worth five minah, he should clothe his father and his mother in ten minah's worth, if he wears ten minah's worth, he should clothe his father and his mother in fifteen minah's worth. His diminution is praise for them."⁵ Not only is one initially responsible to support one's parents, but at least in regard to clothing one should expend an even greater sum upon them than upon oneself.

Interestingly, the family diagram does not extend vertically in both directions. Although one appears to have the definite obligation of giving Tsedakah to one's parents, there are rabbinic passages that indicate that one is relieved of the responsibility of supporting one's children. This is consistent with the discussion on pages 25-26 which indicates that one is not absolutely required to support one's children beyond a certain age. The exception is that a wealthy individual may be compelled to give Tsedakah to his children. Despite the known humiliation of having one's children accepting Tsedakah, there are rabbinic passages contending that one should have other priorities.

The Rabbis state that God Himself explained this verse: The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord (Prov. 20:27). "The Holy

One, blessed be He, said: Let My lamp be in thy hand and thy lamp in My hand, [i.e. keep My Torah and I will keep your soul in safety]. What is the lamp of God? The Torah, as it says, For the mitsvah is a lamp, and the teaching is a light (Prov. 6:23). What is the mitsvah is a lamp? Because everybody who performs a mitsvah is as if he has kindled a light before the Holy One, blessed be He, and as if he had revived his own soul, which is called a light, for it says, The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord (Prov. 20:27). What is the teaching is a light? Because it often happens that when one is eager to fulfill a mitsvah, his Evil Inclination within him says to him: Why do you want to perform this mitsvah and diminish your wealth? Instead of giving away to others, give it to your own children. But the Good Inclination says to him: Give according to the mitsvah; for see what is written: For the mitsvah is a lamp; just as the light of the lamp is undiminished even if a million wax and tallow candles are kindled from it, so will he who gives towards the fulfillment of any mitsvah not suffer a diminution of his possessions. Therefore, For the mitsvah is a lamp, and the teaching is a light (Prov. 6:23).⁶

The intriguing portion of the above passage is that it is the Evil Inclination that tells the potential donor to give his wealth to his children; it is the Good Inclination that says to distribute it to others. The rabbinic justification was the belief that even if one distributed wealth outside the family, one's total wealth will ultimately not be decreased by this

generosity. One relies upon God to make up the difference as well as to take care of one's children.

This reliance upon God to take care of one's children after they have reached maturity is demonstrated in the following text. "R. Meir was a good scribe and had three sela' every Shabat: He spent one sela' on food and drink, another on clothing, and the third on the support of rabbinical scholars. His disciples asked him, What are you doing for your children? He said, If they are righteous, then it will be as David said, Yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread (Ps. 37:25). If they are not righteous, why should I leave my possessions to the enemies of the Omnipresent! Therefore Solomon said, And who knoweth whether he will be a wise man or a fool (Eccles. 2:19)?"⁷ R. Meir believed that if his children were righteous God would provide for them and thus he should not give them Tsedakah. If they were not righteous God would not give his children sustenance, but then the attitude of R. Meir was that he should not support his children if they were not righteous.

In connection with priorities, it should be understood that the economic circumstances of the recipient are not the only consideration of how to allocate Tsedakah. There are social and emotional needs as well, as these may influence the priorities of distribution of Tsedakah. For example, "Our Rabbis taught: If an orphan boy and an orphan girl applied for support, the girl orphan is to be supported first and the boy orphan afterwards because it is the way of a man to go [begging] on doorways but is

not the way of a woman to do so. If an orphan boy and an orphan girl applied for marriage, they marry the girl orphan first and the boy orphan is married afterwards, because the shame of a woman is greater than that of a man."⁸

Here the concept of being eligible for Tsedakah is expanded beyond economic deprivation. One can incur a sense of shame and a concurrent loss of self-esteem by not being married. In the case of a woman who had reached marriageable age during the rabbinic period, this could result in an acute sense of bushah or embarrassment. The Rabbis were under the impression that her embarrassment of not being able to marry would be greater than that of the male orphan. Consequently, the resources of the community, including its economic resources, should first be assigned to her marriage.

Another consideration of the Rabbis in determining priorities was the purpose of the Tsedakah and the circumstances under which it was given? Did the Tsedakah have the potential to bring about a permanent transformation in the status of the donor? These questions were implicitly raised in the following two textual passages: "R. Aba said [in the name] of R. Shim'on b. Lakish: One who lends [money] is greater than one who does Tsedakah; and he who forms a partnership is greater than all."⁹ A similar point of view is expressed in this passage: "Upon him who gives alms shall come a blessing. But greater than he is the lender, and highest of all is he who shares half of the profit."¹⁰

Both texts state that lending money is a greater deed than giving Tsedakah unconditionally. How could this be? We may speculate that a loan creates for the donee a psychological obligation as well as a legal one. This psychological obligation may be so strong as to influence the recipient to find a way to become self-sufficient in order to repay the loan. In addition, his sense of dignity is not as adversely effected if he believes that he is obtaining a loan rather than a gift (refer to pages 77-78).

In any event, the greatest method of helping another is enabling the other person to gain self-sufficiency. This is implicit in the concept of partnership or sharing in profits. The money is utilized in such a manner that income is created and shared between the two individuals. The income that is produced is sufficient to enable the "donee" to escape from dependence upon others and his self-esteem is immeasurably enhanced. Maimonides later utilized these two sources in his formulation of his famous ladder of Tsedakah with its eight rungs.¹¹

Although the final text for this chapter does not deal with Tsedakah directly, it can be used for purposes of comparison since it deals with priorities in lending money. The commentary is on the verse: If thou lend money to any of My people, even to the poor with thee, thou shalt not be to him as a creditor; neither shall ye lay upon him interest (Exod. 22:24). The particular words analyzed are To any of My people. "If an Israelite and a Gentile stand before you to borrow, any of My

people should be given preference; if it be a poor man and a rich man, the poor man should be given preference; if it be your own poor [your relatives] and the poor of your city, your own poor should be given preference over the poor of your city; if it be the poor of your city and the poor of another city, the poor of your city should be given preference, for it is said: Even to the poor with thee."¹² The theme of the above passage is that one's loyalties should consistently be extended to those who are nearest and closest.

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER X

1. See generally: Cronbach, Abraham, "The Gradations of Benevolence", H.U.C.A. XVI (1941), pp.163-186 and Rosenberg, Aaron, A Translation of the "Laws of Tzedakah" in the Arba-ah Turim by Jacob Ben Asher and a Comparison Between the Treatment of the Laws of Tzedakah in the Mishneh Torah, the Arba-Ah Turim, and the Shulchan Aruch. Rabbinic Thesis, Cincinnati 1974.
2. Vayikra Rabah 34:15.
3. Pesikta Rabati 23/24, p.122b.
4. Seder Eliyahu Rabah 27, p.135, Friedmann edition.
5. Ibid., p.136.
6. Shemot Rabah 36:3.
7. Kohelet Rabah 2:1, 17.
8. Bavli, Ketubot 67a-67b.
9. Bavli, Shabat 63a.
10. Avot de Rabbi Natan, chapter 41, version A, p.131, Schechter edition.
11. Cronbach, Abraham, "The Gradation of Benevolence", supra, p.175.
12. Mekilta De-Rabbi Ishmael, Lauterbach edition, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976, Vol.3, p.148; parallel Bavli, Bava Metsia 71a.

CHAPTER XI
VOWS AND TSEDAKAH

In this discussion it is first necessary to distinguish between the two legal concepts of "oath" and "vow". Under talmudic law an oath was a method of judicial proof and was utilized in civil cases. In the event that there was insufficient evidence in the civil litigation one of the parties would be permitted to take an "oath" in order to rebut or to confirm previous testimony. Generally speaking, non-judicial oaths were deemed as "vows".¹

Vows are promises made under religious sanction. Under talmudic law there are two principal kinds of vows: "(1) A voluntary promise to bring a sacrifice which he who makes the vow is not otherwise in duty bound to bring; or a promise to give a certain sum to purposes of common charity or education... (2) The second chief kind of vow consists in promises made to abstain from the enjoyment of certain things..."²

This chapter will focus on the first type of vows of making a promise to give Tsedakah. This type of vow falls under the category of "dedications" (nidrei hekdesch). One legal issue that is raised by nidrei hekdesch is what is the liability of the person who makes the vow if the item that has been promised is lost after the vow has been made. "When he who promises points toward the object which he intends to give, and says, 'This I dedicate to such and such a holy or charitable cause,' then he is not bound to replace the thing if it is lost...If, on the other

hand, he says, 'I promise such and such an object, or such and such a sum of money to be devoted to that purpose,' then he is bound to replace it if it becomes lost. The former kind of vows are called 'nedabah' (= 'gift'); the latter kind 'neder' (= 'promise')."3

The significance that the Rabbis attached to vows is indicated by their devoting an entire tractate in the Talmud to the subject. The tractate, Nedarim, analyzes the eleven chapters of Mishnah dealing with vows.⁴ The above tractate does not include the Nazirite vow to which a separate tractate is devoted nor does it concentrate on "oaths", which are discussed in the tractate Shevu'ot.

In the last tractate mentioned, Shevu'ot, there is a text demonstrating the point that one may not make an "oath" concerning Tsedakah since one is already obligated to give Tsedakah. "[If] he said, I swear that I shall give so-and-so, or, I shall not give. What is meant by, I shall give? Shall we say, Tsedakah to the poor? He already stands adjured from Mount Sinai, for it is said: Thou shall surely give him (Deut. 15:10) -- It must therefore mean a gift to a rich man."⁵ In the rabbinic frame of reference all mitsvot were given at Mount Sinai. All Jews of all generations were present in person or in spirit at this moment of revelation and are obligated to perform the commandments. One of these mitsvot was to give Tsedakah to the poor (Deut. 15:7-11). One cannot take an "oath" to fulfill a mitsvah. One is already under an obligation to perform the

mitsvah and such an "oath" is a nullity. Consequently, in the above passage the Rabbis reasoned that the "oath" applied to giving something to a rich man, for whom one is not under a divine commandment to provide support.

The concept of vows and Tsedakah was already briefly alluded to in Chapter IV, entitled "The Penalties of Not Giving Tsedakah" (see pages 58-59). One of the penalties inflicted upon a community if a member did not honor his vows regarding Tsedakah was the withholding of rain. A parallel text speculates as to why there was famine during the kingdom of David: "There might be among you men who subscribe to Tsedakah in public but do not give them, as it is written, As vapors and wind without rain, so is he that boasteth himself of a false gift (Prov. 25:14)."⁶ Both the wind and the braggart fail to deliver their "gift" as expected.

In some instances the community would not tolerate the situation in which a member failed to honor his commitment in respect to Tsedakah. The community justifiably relied upon the pledge of such an individual and could not permit an undesirable precedent to be established. The entire system of Tsedakah could be jeopardized if people did not keep their vows and thus, on occasion, the community would expropriate the property of those individuals who did not comply with their public vows.

"And on account of four things is the property of householders given into the hands of the government: On account of those who retain in their possession bills which have been

paid [with the intention of collecting upon them a second time]; on account of those who lend money on usury; on account of those who had the power to protest [against wrongdoing] and did not protest; and on account of those who publicly subscribe to Tsedakah and do not give."7

The Rabbis generally discouraged individuals from making vows since the consequences were so serious. In both the biblical and rabbinic eras there was a strong belief in the power of the spoken word. One was strongly cautioned to weigh one's words carefully. This point of view is revealed in Eccles. 5:1-6. For example, Eccles. 5:5 states: Suffer not thy mouth to bring thy flesh into guilt, neither say thou before the messenger, that it was an error; wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thy hands. There is a rabbinic commentary to this verse. "R. Yehoshu'a b. Levi interpreted the verse relating to those who undertake to subscribe to Tsedakah but do not pay. Neither say thou before the messenger -- that is the official [the alms-collector], that it was an error -- [saying] I am sorry [I cannot pay]. Wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, -- at the voice with which you said [that you would give the Tsedakah]. And destroy the work of thy hands, -- on the few pious acts which are in the hand of that man, the Holy One, blessed be He, brings a curse and causes them to be lost to him."8

What was almost as harmful to the system of Tsedakah as the one who failed to keep his vows was the individual who delayed

payment. A vow to pay Tsedakah had to be paid in a timely manner. The primary biblical proof-text for this talmudic position was Deut. 23:22 which states: When thou shalt vow a vow to the Lord thy God, thou shalt not delay to pay it; for the Lord thy God will surely require it of thee; and it will be a sin in thee.

A vow of giving Tsedakah had to be paid promptly, even if the donor did not specify a fixed date at the time he made the vow. He could not delay indefinitely; otherwise, the vow became meaningless. Consequently, the Rabbis created a date for the vow to take effect, even if no such date was originally given. The talmudic discussion focuses on the three pilgrimage festivals, Pesah, Shavu'ot, and Sukot, as having the capacity to trigger the date that the vow comes into effect.

The following discussion includes vows concerning Tsedakah and other obligations in which the date of performance is at issue. "Our Rabbis taught: Those who are liable for a money valuation, for a valuation, for a herem [something devoted], for consecrations, for sin-offerings, trespass-offerings and peace-offerings, Tsedakah contributions, tithes: firstborn and tithe of cattle, paschal lamb, gleanings, forgotten sheaves and peah, as soon as three festivals have elapsed transgress the mitsvah of not delaying (Deut. 23:22). R. Shim'on said: The three festivals must be in their order, with Pesah first. R. Meir said: As soon as one festival has passed, he transgresses the mitsvah of not delaying. R. Eli'ezer b. Ya'akov said: As soon as two festivals

have elapsed, he transgresses the mitsvah of not delaying. R. Ele'azar b. R. Shim'on said: As soon as Shavu'ot has passed, he transgresses the mitsvah of not delaying."9

As can be seen, there is a dispute among the Rabbis as to whether one, two or three festivals have to transpire before the obligation becomes immediately effective. The talmudic argument continues and another biblical verse is analyzed, namely Deut. 23:24, That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt observe and do; according as thou hast vowed freely unto the Lord thy God, even that which thou hast promised with thy mouth.

Each phrase in the above verse is dissected by the Rabbis to apply to different obligations. "Our Rabbis taught: That which is gone out of thy lips -- this is an affirmative mitsvah. Thou shalt observe -- this is a negative mitsvah. And do, -- this is a warning to the Beit Din to make thee do. According as thou hast vowed -- this is a vow. To the Lord thy God -- these are sin-offerings and trespass-offerings, burnt-offerings and peace-offerings. Freely -- this is a freewill-offering in its literal meaning. Even that which thou hast promised -- these are things sanctioned for the repair of the Temple. With thy mouth -- this is Tsedakah."10

Thus, finally at the very conclusion of the verse in question the rabbinic interpretation of the three words, with thy mouth, is that they apply to the mitsvah of Tsedakah. This leads to another talmudic discussion in which the author contends that

Tsedakah is a unique mitsvah that should be differentiated from other mitsvot and not dependent upon the passage of festivals.

With thy mouth, "this is Tsedakah. Raba said, For Tsedakah one becomes liable at once. What is the reason? Because the poor are waiting [are standing]. Surely this is obvious? - You might think that, as Tsedakah is mentioned in the passage dealing with offerings, [it need not be paid] until three festivals have transpired, as [in the case of] offerings. We are therefore told this is not so. Only the others [offerings] were made by the All-Merciful dependent upon the festivals, but this [Tsedakah] is not so, because the poor are waiting."¹¹

The reasoning in the last passage distinguishes Tsedakah from the other mitsvot in that "the poor are waiting." This creates a sense of urgency that separates Tsedakah from the other mitsvot in question. If one did not immediately honor one's vow of Tsedakah, the poor, who rely upon Tsedakah, may die in the interim (refer to Chapter VI, The Urgency of Giving Tsedakah).

Still another legal issue in regard to vows is whether one may use or exchange an item after one has already vowed that it will be given for Tsedakah. Does the one who still possesses the item have any ownership rights or has he lost all control over the item? For example, if one pledges or vows to give a coin or an amount equivalent to several coins to Tsedakah, is one permitted to exchange these coins after a vow has been made? "R. Nahman said in the name of R. Abuha, If one says: This sela' is for Tsedakah, he is permitted to exchange it."¹² Thus, one is

not relieved of one's obligation to give a sela' but one does not have to give the identical sela' that he may have held in his hand at the time he made the vow. Since the coins were interchangeable and of equivalent value, one could retain the particular sela' that one held at the time of the vow and substitute another.

A distinction was further drawn between vows for Tsedakah and consecrations to the sanctuary. Something vowed for Tsedakah could still be used by the owner, at least temporarily, while in the case of consecration, one may not use the item after it has been consecrated, or set apart for holy use.¹³ Note that this paragraph contradicts the text on the previous page which states that Tsedakah immediately becomes due and payable upon the making of the vow since the "poor are waiting."

The next question raised is whether one may exchange the money pledged to Tsedakah after it has already been given to the alms collector. There are two diametrically opposed views on this. "Our Rabbis taught: If one said: This sela' shall be for Tsedakah, then before it has reached the hand of the Tsedakah treasurer, it is permitted to exchange it, but after it has come into the treasurer's hand, it is forbidden to exchange it. But it is not so, for R. Yanai borrowed and then paid it. -- It is different with R. Yanai, for what he did was acceptable to the poor. The more he delayed the more did he succeed in collecting and bringing in to them."¹⁴

If one takes literally the passage Thou shalt not delay it (Deut. 23:22) the Tsedakah should be immediately distributed by the alms collector once he has received the money that has been vowed. An exception to this rule was made in the case of R. Yanai who himself was a treasurer of Tsedakah. He apparently delayed the distribution of Tsedakah by borrowing from the funds collected. However, once he returned the funds he added a surplus to the original amount. Needless to say the idea of "borrowing funds" by the treasurer of Tsedakah could lead to embezzlement; however, this was not raised by the Rabbis. Again the system of Tsedakah was based upon the integrity of the alms collector (see pages 91-93).

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER XI

1. Encyclopaedia Judaica, "Oath", Vol.12, Columns 1295-1302, Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1972.
The Jewish Encyclopedia, "Oath", Vol. IX, pp.365-367, New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1905.
2. The Jewish Encyclopedia, "Vows", Vol.XII, pp.451-452 supra.
3. Ibid.
4. Encyclopaedia Judaica, "Vows and Vowing", Vol.16, Column 227, supra.
5. Bavli, Shevu'ot 25a.
6. Bavli, Yevamot 78b.
7. Bavli, Sukot 29a-29b.
8. Kohelet Rabah 5:1, 5; see also Midrash Tehilim 52:1.
9. Bavli, Rosh Hashanah 4a-4b.
10. Ibid., 6a.
11. Ibid.
12. Bavli, 'Arakhin 6a.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 6a-6b.

CHAPTER XII

MOTIVATION IN GIVING TSEDAKAH

The motivation of the donor at the time that he performed Tsedakah was not of major concern to the Rabbis. The manner in which the Tsedakah was given and whether or not the Tsedakah met the particular needs of the recipient were of far greater significance. There are only a few references in rabbinic literature that refer to the state of mind of the donor. The statements are somewhat inconsistent.

One text that is directly applicable to the subject matter of this chapter is as follows. "R. Yudah b. R. Shalom explained: In the same way as a man's food is determined for him from Rosh Hashanah so are his losses determined for him from Rosh Hashanah. If he is merited -- Deal thy bread to the hungry (Isa. 58:7) and if he is not merited then he will -- bring the poor that are outcast to his house (Ibid.). [The following] is about the sons of Raban Yohanan b. Zakai's sister. He [Raban Yohanan b. Zakai] saw in a dream that they would lose 700 denari in that year. He forced them to give Tsedakah until only 17 denari were left. On 'Erev Yom Kipur the Emperor's house sent and seized them [the remaining denari]. Raban Yohanan b. Zakai said, Do not fear [that you will lose any more]; you had 17 denari and these they have taken. They [his nephews] said to him, How did you know what was going to happen? He said: I saw it in a dream. They said, Why did you not tell us? He said, Because I wanted you to do a mitsvah for its own sake."¹

In the above passage the nephews had given Tsedakah without an ulterior motive. Raban Yohanan b. Zakai was aware that all their money would be confiscated by the government. Apparently he became aware of this through a dream that occurred at the time of Rosh Hashanah. During the next ten days prior to Yom Kipur he convinced his nephews to give virtually all their money for the purpose of Tsedakah. If the nephews had advance notice that they would lose all their remaining money at 'Erev Yom Kipur they may have acted differently. In any event, this text is one of the few rabbinic texts that is concerned that Tsedakah be performed for its own sake.²

A more typical passage is one in which the donor is cognizant of some benefit at the time that he gives Tsedakah. For example, "R. Hiya said to his wife, When a poor man comes, be quick to offer him bread, so that others may be quick to offer it to your children. She exclaimed, You curse them by suggesting that they may become beggars! A verse is written, he said, Because [bigelal] that for this thing (Deut. 15:10), whereby the School of R. Yishma'el taught: It is a wheel that revolves in the world. It was taught, R. Gamliel b. Rabi said, And he shall give thee mercy, and have compassion upon thee, and multiply thee (Deut. 13:18) he who is merciful to others, mercy is shown to him by Heaven, while he who is not merciful to others, mercy is not shown to him by Heaven."³

In the above text there is a quid pro quo mentality. The donor gives Tsedakah because he believes that his children will

ultimately benefit from his actions. They will need Tsedakah themselves since poverty is cyclical and will eventually effect one's family (refer to pages 19-20). The donor in this instance is resigned to the prospect that poverty will blight his children. However, by giving Tsedakah now he will ameliorate their future misfortune.

The most succinct text which boldly justifies giving Tsedakah with an ulterior motive is the following. "It was taught: If one says, This sela' is for Tsedakah in order that my sons may live and that I may merit the future world, he is completely righteous."⁴

One's motivation is irrelevant, what is of paramount significance is that one performs the Tsedakah. The above text is discussed by Abraham Cronbach. "Somewhat divergent is the thought based on Bava Batra 10b, that one is a full fledged Tsadik even though one says, 'I gave this coin in order that my children may live' or 'that I might enjoy the hereafter' ... One who is already a perfect Tsadik does not lose that rank by speaking thus. One who is not already a perfect Tsadik becomes such by the mere act of philanthropy. The motive may not be the most exalted. But charity is exalted. The poor have been helped."⁵

However, motivation is not completely irrelevant to the rabbinic mind. In the same passage as cited by Cronbach, a distinction is made between the state of mind of an Israelite and an idolator. Even if an idolator gives Tsedakah, he is not

considered righteous because of his evil motives. One possible explanation of this troublesome passage is that regardless of what the Israelite states, he really is giving Tsedakah for its own sake. Nevertheless, the following text illustrates an ethnocentric perspective of a persecuted minority which was living in Palestine under Roman rule.

"Raban Yohanan b. Zakai said to his disciples: My sons, what is the meaning of the verse, Tzedakah exalteth a nation, but the kindness of the peoples is sin (Prov. 14:34)? R. Eli'ezer answered and said: Tzedakah exalteth a nation, this is Israel of whom it is written, Who is like thy people Israel one nation in the earth (2 Sam. 7:23)? But the kindness of the people is sin (Prov. 14:34), all the Tsedakah and kindness done by the nations of idolators is counted to them as sin, because they only do it to magnify themselves, as it says, That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savor unto the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and of his sons (Ezra 6:10). But this is not complete Tsedakah, seeing that it has been taught: If a man says, I give this sela' for Tsedakah in order that my sons may live and that I merit the future world, he is completely righteous. There is no contradiction, in the one case we speak of an Israelite, in the other of an idolator...because they only do it in order that their dominion may be prolonged...because they only do it to display haughtiness, and whoever displays haughtiness is cast into Gehinom...since they do it only to reproach us."⁶

Thus, in the above passage the motive of the "idolator" in doing Tsedakah vitiates the act, while the motive of the "Israelite" does not effect the merit of the act. However, in the same text there is a mitigating sentence which attributes some benefit to the other nations of the world that perform Tsedakah. "As it has been taught: R. Yohanan b. Zakai said to them, Just as the sin-offering makes atonement for Israel, so Tsedakah makes atonement for the nations of the world."⁷

As stated in the introductory paragraph of this chapter, the texts in question simply do not present any discernible pattern in respect to motivation. The Hebrew word kavanah is not found in the above texts. The Rabbis were not directly concerned with the "intention" of the donor. The only references are to the "motivation" of the donor and these references have inconsistent conclusions as to the significance of this state of mind.

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER XII

1. Bavli, Bava Batra 10a.
2. A story is found in Vayikra Rabah 34:12 which mentions Tsedakah and concludes with the same phrase of doing a mitsvah for its own sake.
3. Bavli, Shabat 151b.
4. Bavli, Bava Batra 10b; parallel Bavli, Pesachim 8a-8b. See also Bavli, Bava Batra 9b.
5. Cronbach, Abraham, "Me'il Zedakah - Second Article", H.U.C.A., XII-XIII (1937-1938), p.635-696, 671.
6. Bavli, Bava Batra 10b; see also Bavli, Rosh Hashanah 4a.
7. Bavli, Bava Batra 10b.

CHAPTER XIII

TSEDAKAH IN RELATION TO OTHER MITSVOT

In comparing the mitsvah of Tsedakah to the other mitsvot, Tsedakah was often considered one of the most important mitsvot that could be performed. One explanation for this is that Tsedakah has the capacity to deliver a human being from death (Prov. 10:2). This quality of Tsedakah gives it a special status among the mitsvot. The Rabbis have written in regard to Tsedakah: "And there is no drug as effective against death as Tsedakah...And the wise taught: Who preserves one soul of Israel it is as if he preserves a whole world."¹ As can be seen from Chapter III, few mitsvot have the power of Tsedakah (see pages 33-36).

In order to emphasize the importance of a particular mitsvah, the Rabbis frequently characterize its performance as equivalent in merit to the performance of all other mitsvot combined. Since no one actually performs all 613 mitsvot, the Rabbis have created an alternative system in which the performance of certain mitsvot earns the same kavod in the eyes of God as if that individual had actually observed all the mitsvot. Tsedakah is one of the few mitsvot that has this special function. This viewpoint is expressed in the rabbinic comment to the verse If thou lend money to any of My people, even to the poor with thee, thou shalt not be to him as a creditor; neither shall ye lay upon him interest (Exod. 22:24). "This is what is written, He that putteth not out his money on interest

(Ps. 15:5). Come and see: anyone who has riches and gives Tsedakah to the poor, and does not lend on interest is regarded as if he observed all the mitsvot, for it says, He that putteth not out his money on interest, Nor taketh a bribe against the innocent. He that doeth these things shall never be moved (Ps. 15:5)."2

Nevertheless, Tsedakah is not always given the highest value among the mitsvot. The following text illustrates that there are actions that one may take that will provide greater comfort to the poor than the mere act of giving them Tsedakah. "R. Yitshak said, he who gives a perutah to a poor man obtains six blessings and he who comforts with words obtains eleven blessings. He who gives a perutah to a poor man obtains six blessings, as it is written, Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry and bring the poor to thy house etc. when thou seest the naked etc. (Isa. 58:7). [The six blessings are found in Isa. 58:8-9.] He who comforts him with words obtains eleven blessings, as it is written, And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, And satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in darkness, And thy gloom be as the noonday; And the Lord will guide thee continually; And satisfy thy soul in drought...And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places, Thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations, etc. (Isa. 58:10-12). [The eleven blessings are found in Isa. 58:10-12]."3

The Rabbis chose to interpret the Bible literally if it served their homiletical purpose. In the above texts the actions

of Tsedakah are described in Isa. 58:7, namely, giving bread to the poor, bringing the poor into one's house, and clothing them. The six different rewards for this mitsvah are set forth immediately afterwards, Isa. 58:8-9. In Isa. 58:10 a different type of mitsvah is described, namely, to be compassionate and to satisfy the afflicted soul. After this conduct is described in the first half of Isa. 58:10, the Rabbis counted eleven separate blessings from the second half of Isa. 58:10 to the end of Isa. 58:12. These eleven blessings were the direct reward of the actions set forth in the first half of Isa. 58:10. The Rabbis interpreted this portion of the verse to mean to be compassionate with one's words to the hungry person and to give him some emotional comfort. They considered this a more difficult and a more valuable mitsvah than merely giving physical items to the poor. They justified their preference by interpreting Isa. 58:7-12 as stating that one received six blessings for the mitsvah of Tsedakah and eleven blessings for comforting the poor with words.

The actions described in Isa. 58:10 as interpreted in the above text would fall under the category of Gemilut Hasadim. Generally, the Rabbis contended that Gemilut Hasadim was a more significant mitsvah than Tsedakah. Their reasoning is demonstrated in the following passage. "Tsedakah and Gemilut Hasadim are like all the mitsvot in the Torah, only that Tsedakah applies to the living and Gemilut Hasadim to the dead, Tsedakah to the poor and Gemilut Hasadim to the poor and the rich, Tsedakah to money and Gemilut Hasadim to money and the body."4

Tsedakah can only be given to a living person; it is useless to a person who is already deceased. However, one can perform acts of Gemilut Hasadim on behalf of the dead. For example, the act of taharah, the ritual washing of the corpse, is an act of Gemilut Hasadim. The burial of the body, the Hesped [the eulogy] are acts that bring honor to the deceased and would be classified as Gemilut Hasadim. Tsedakah is only given to those in need, namely, the poor. One cannot give Tsedakah to a rich person since he does not have the need. However, one can perform an act of Gemilut Hasadim for a rich person. The act of bikur holim, visiting the sick, can be done for a rich person as well as a poor person. Tsedakah requires that one gives wealth, usually money, to another person. Gemilut Hasadim requires one to use more than one's wealth; it requires that one use one's physical body in order to help another person. For example, if a person is carrying a very heavy burden one could offer to share that burden. In doing so one is actually performing an act of Gemilut Hasadim with one's body.

A similar viewpoint of the superiority of Gemilut Hasadim over Tsedakah is found in the following text. "R. Ele'azar said, Greater is he who does Tsedakah than [he who offers] all the sacrifices, for it is said, To do Tsedakah and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice (Prov. 21:3). R. Ele'azar said, Gemilut Hasadim is greater than Tsedakah, for it is said, Sow to yourselves according to your Tsedakah, but reap according to your Hased (Hos. 10:12) [the last word is interpreted as

meaning Gemilut Hasadim]; if a man sows, it is doubtful, whether he will eat [the harvest] or not, but when a man reaps, he will certainly eat...

"Our Rabbis taught: In three respects is Gemilut Hasadim superior to Tsedakah. Tsedakah is done with one's money, but Gemilut Hasadim is done with one's person and one's money. Tsedakah can be given only to the poor, Gemilut Hasadim [can be given to] both the rich and the poor. Tsedakah can be given to the living only, Gemilut Hasadim can be done both to the living and to the dead."⁵

Gemilut Hasadim is acknowledged to be superior to Tsedakah since it has more universal application. It is a more flexible mitsvah in that it is not dependent upon the dispersal of funds. Even a destitute person who is simply unable to give any Tsedakah, despite the caveat of Gitin 7b that a poor man who himself receives Tsedakah should give Tsedakah, can still perform an act of Gemilut Hasadim. Nevertheless, in the same passage as quoted above, R. Ele'azar declares the unique and valuable role of Tsedakah. "He who does Tsedakah and justice is regarded as though he had filled all the world with kindness, for it is said, He loveth Tsedakah and justice; the earth is full of the loving-kindness of the Lord (Ps. 33:5)."⁶

Earlier in the above text Tsedakah is considered to be a greater mitsvah than that of offering sacrifices. The superiority of Tsedakah over sacrifice is discussed in much greater detail in the following passage. "This is what Scripture

says: to do Tsedakah and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice (Prov. 21:3). It is not written 'as much as sacrifice' but more than sacrifice. How? Sacrifices were done only when the Temple was standing but Tsedakah and justice were done while the Temple was standing and when it was not. Another explanation: sacrifices atone only for sins which were committed by mistake but Tsedakah and justice atone for sins committed by mistake and on purpose. Another explanation: sacrifices are practiced only by the lower ones [human beings] but Tsedakah and justice by the higher ones [angels] and the lower ones. Another explanation: sacrifices are done only in this world but Tsedakah and justice are done in this world and the world to come."7

From the above texts we can observe that Tsedakah had a special status among the mitsvot and was highly valued. Nevertheless, in comparing Tsedakah to the other mitsvot it should be noted that the Rabbis considered Gemilut Hasadim to be an even greater mitsvah.

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER XIII

1. Seder Eliyahu Rabah 11, p.52-53, Friedmann edition.
2. Shemot Rabah 31:4.
3. Bavli, Bava Batra 9b.
4. Tosefta, Peah 4, p.60, Lieberman edition.
5. Bavli, Sukah 49b.
6. Ibid.
7. Devarim Rabah 5:3.

CHAPTER XIV

TSEDAKAH IN RESPECT TO SHABAT AND FAST DAYS

Shabat was the most joyous and festive day of the week. The Rabbis urged their fellow Jews to save their most elaborate meals for Shabat. Thus a Jew was encouraged to set aside the most delicious foods available and the best wine for this sacred day. However, the poor may not be able to afford any of these items. If the best meal should be on Shabat, what should a poor person do? The question is raised of whether the poor individual should fast on 'Erev Shabat in order to have enough food for the special meals of Shabat.

"R. Hidka [said], we say to him, What you wish to eat on 'Erev Shabat, eat on Shabat. And the whole day of 'Erev Shabat we make him fast? Rather, do as suggested by R. 'Akiva who said, Make your Shabat a weekday and do not be in need of other creatures."¹

During the rabbinic era an individual was expected to eat fifteen meals a week, two meals a day on six days of the week and three meals on Shabat. However, if a poor person had sufficient food for two meals for a day he must not accept food from the tamhui and if he has sufficient food for fourteen meals he must not accept money from the kupah.² Consequently, what happens when a poor person on the beginning of the sixth day of the week (Thursday evening) has only enough food for four meals? Should he eat one of the meals on Thursday evening and fast all of Friday morning and Friday afternoon in order to have three meals

on Shabat? Given the above situation, R. 'Akiva believed that an individual should not fast on Friday but should have two meals on the sixth day and two meals on Shabat.

It was the position of R. 'Akiva that Shabat should be like a weekday by having the regular two meals rather than having three meals on Shabat if the alternative was to either fast on Friday or obtain additional food through Tsedakah. R. 'Akiva expressed the view that one should avoid dependence on others if at all possible (see pages 23-25). One should of course endeavor to make Shabat a special occasion with festive meals. However, if this can only be attained by receiving Tsedakah one should refrain from such dependence upon others. The better course of action is to keep one's Shabat meals simple and similar to weekday meals. The extra foods and festive meals are not absolutely required on Shabat and may be deleted if they can only be obtained through Tsedakah.

On Friday afternoon the family was usually extremely busy with their preparations for Shabat. Nevertheless, even at this time it was permissible for the alms collectors to pay a visit to the home. "As was said by R. Nahman in the name of Rabah b. Abuha, because the alms collectors can take a pledge for a Tsedakah contribution even on 'Erev Shabat.'"3

Tsedakah is such an important mitsvah that certain aspects of it can even be performed on Shabat itself. "Surely R. Hisda and R. Hamnuna both said, In regard to accounts of a religious

matter, one is allowed to calculate them on Shabat; and R. Ele'azar said: One may assign Tsedakah to the poor on Shabat."4

The justification for dealing with these financial considerations on Shabat was that these were "accounts" of religious matters concerning the entire community and not the personal affairs of any individual. This type of activity was not deemed to be a desecration of Shabat. From the text itself one cannot be certain as to whether the Rabbis only permitted decisions to be made as to the amounts of Tsedakah to be assigned to those in need in the community or whether they also permitted the actual money of Tsedakah to be distributed as well on Shabat.

In any event, it is interesting to note that even on Shabat one could discuss certain financial transactions and make certain financial decisions. Tsedakah is one of the few activities sanctioned in this realm. "Is speech forbidden? R. Hisda and R. Hamnuna both said: Accounts in connection with mitsvah may be calculated on Shabat. And R. Ele'azar said, One may assign Tsedakah to the poor on Shabat. And R. Ya'akov b. Idi said in R. Yohanan's name: One may supervise matters of life and death and matters of communal urgency on Shabat, and one may go to the synagogues to attend to communal affairs on Shabat. Also, R. Shmuel b. Nahmani said in R. Yohanan's name...One may make arrangements on Shabat for the betrothal of young girls and the elementary education of a child and to teach him a trade! Scripture says, nor pursuing thine [own] business, nor speaking thereof (Isa. 58:13); thine affairs are forbidden, the affairs of

Heaven are permitted."⁵ In Isa. 58:13 one is urged to make Shabat a delight and not to engage in one's personal business or even to speak about the matter. However, the Rabbis interpreted Tsedakah and the other activities listed as not falling into that category but rather as doing work on behalf of God.

The Rabbis were well aware that the dire poverty of the poor interfered with the joyous quality of Shabat. On occasion, Shabat could be an especially bad day for the poor. "R. Yehoshu'a b. Levi asked, All the days of the poor are evil (Prov. 15:15)? - Surely there are Shabatot and Festivals! -- However, the biblical verse is true according to Shmuel, for R. Shmuel said, A change of diet is the beginning of sickness."⁶ Sabbaths and festivals would not necessarily contradict the verse in question that All the days of the poor are evil (Prov. 15:15). During the week the poor would subsist on meager rations, perhaps only dry bread. If they ate meat or other expensive foods on Shabat they could become extremely ill.

Tragically the poor were in such dire circumstances that they were grateful for virtually any improvement in their condition. "And R. Yitshak said, Sunshine on the Shabat is Tsedakah for the poor as it is said, But unto you that fear My name shall the sun of Tsedakah arise with healing in its wings (Mal. 3:20)."⁷ For the poor just having a warm, sunny day, especially on Shabat, was considered to be Tsedakah from God.

There was an interrelationship between fast days and the giving of Tsedakah. It was customary on fast days to give

Tsedakah equivalent to the value of the food saved during the fast. Thus, "Mar Zutra says: The merit of a fast day lies in the Tsedakah dispensed."⁸

Furthermore, on fast days, as on all other days, the Rabbis were concerned with promptly dispersing Tsedakah to the hungry poor. This was especially true in regard to food that could quickly spoil. This attitude is reflected in the commentary to the following verse, She that was full of justice, Tsedek lodged in her, But now murderers (Isa. 1:21). "If on a fast day, the distribution of Tsedakah is postponed overnight, it is just as though blood was shed, for it is written, She that was full of justice, Tsedek, etc. (Isa. 1:21). This applies only to bread and dates, but in the case of money, wheat or barley it does not matter."⁹

The Hebrew word for lodge, yalin, in the above verse has the meaning of staying overnight. The Rabbis made a wordplay on the verse and stated that if one kept the Tsedakah proceeds overnight (postponed over night) it was equivalent to murder since the desperate poor may starve to death during the delay. The Rabbis were concerned about the urgency of distributing Tsedakah (see Chapter VI). This sense of urgency, however, applied only to food that would readily spoil.

Finally, fasting and Tsedakah are compared in the following text. "R. Ele'azar also said: Fasting is greater than Tsedakah. What is the reason? One is performed with a man's money, the

other with his body."10 Like Gemilut Hasadim fasting requires more physical effort than the act of giving Tsedakah.

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER XIV

1. Bavli, Shabat 118a.
2. Ibid.
3. Bavli, Bava Batra 8b; see also Bavli, Kidushin 76b.
4. Bavli, Ketubot 5a.
5. Bavli, Shabat 150a.
6. Bavli, Bava Batra 146a.
7. Bavli, Ta'anit 8b.
8. Bavli, Berakhot 6b.
9. Bavli, Sanhedrin 35a.
10. Bavli, Berakhot 32b.

CHAPTER XV

BIBLICAL FIGURES PERFORMING TSEDAKAH

Since Tsedakah was so highly valued within the rabbinic world the Rabbis turned to the Bible to find role models. Hebrew Scripture was their most sacred and holy text and the biblical figures within it could be a source of inspiration to their fellow Jews. Various biblical stories served as vehicles of instruction for the Rabbis. Through their actions some of the biblical figures demonstrated the nature and value of Tsedakah.

For example, one of the reasons that Noah was called Tsadiq, righteous (Gen. 6:9), was that he gave food to God's creatures during the time of the flood. His feeding of the animals on the ark during the deluge has been characterized as an act of Tsedakah.¹

Although our first patriarch, Abraham, had some critical flaws, he was frequently utilized by the Rabbis as an example of an exceptionally good human being. This was illustrated in their stories of how Abraham practiced Tsedakah. In the following text Abraham is compared to David in this regard. "Moreover, Abraham our father would first practice Tsedakah and then justice, as it is said, For I have known him to the end that he may command his children and his household after him that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do Tsedakah and [then] justice (Gen. 18:19). When two litigants would come before Abraham our father for judgment and one would say of his fellow, He owes me a minah, Abraham our father would take out a minah of his own, give it to

him, and say to them, Arrange your claims before me. Then each would arrange his claims. In the event that the defendant was found owing the other a minah, Abraham would say to the one with the minah, Give the minah to thy fellow. But if it was not so, he would say to them, Divide the sum between you and depart in peace.

"King David on the other hand did not act in this manner. Instead he would first practice justice and then Tsedakah, as it is said, And David executed justice and Tsedakah unto all his people (2 Sam. 8:15). When litigants came for judgment before King David, he would say to them, Arrange your claims. In the event that one was found owing his fellow a minah, [David] would give him a minah of his own. And if not, he would say to them, Divide the sum between you and depart in peace."²

In the above story the Rabbis contrasted two biblical verses to demonstrate a point about the character of Abraham and David. In the verse referring to Abraham (Gen. 18:19), Tsedakah is mentioned prior to justice. In the verse concerning David (2 Sam. 8:15), the word order is reversed and justice precedes Tsedakah. Since nothing is accidental in the Bible, the Rabbis noticed the reversal in word order in regard to these two verses and wrote a story to explain the difference. They concluded that the text indicated that Abraham's first priority was Tsedakah while David's was justice.

The above text describes a tension between Tsedakah and justice. The Rabbis believed that these values were not

necessarily compatible in every respect. They needed to be reconciled and David's life was an example of such reconciliation. David's technique was "arbitration". In this context "arbitration" precludes a strict or harsh implementation of the law. David's objective was to attain a result in which the interests of both parties were taken into consideration and that "arbitration" would lead to peace between the parties.

"What is that kind of justice that contains peace? One must say that it is arbitration. So it was with David, as Scripture says, And David executed justice and Tsedakah unto all his people (2 Sam. 8:15). Surely where there is [strict] justice there is no Tsedakah, and where there is Tsedakah, there is no justice! What is the kind of justice which contains Tsedakah? One must say, arbitration.

"However, the following explanation of this verse will accord with the First Tanna [who holds arbitration to be prohibited]. In judging, [David] used to acquit the guiltless and condemn the guilty; but when he saw that the condemned man was penniless, he helped him out of his own funds. This is justice and Tsedakah -- justice to one by awarding him his money and Tsedakah to the other by paying out of his own funds. And therefore Scripture says about David, David practiced justice and Tsedakah unto all his people (Ibid.)...Indeed, even if he had not paid for him out of his own funds, he would nevertheless have executed justice and Tsedakah; justice to the one by awarding him

his money and Tsedakah to the other by freeing him from a robbed thing in his possession."³

The above passage shows a unique twist to the idea of Tsedakah. If the person who was liable to the other party could not pay, David would give him money in order to pay his just debt. If the person who was liable to the other party had money, David would compel him to practice Tsedakah. The Tsedakah would free him from his ill-gotten gains. The "Tsedakah" would be given to the party from whom he had wrongfully taken the money.

Yose b. Yohanan of Jerusalem said, "Let thy house be opened wide and let the poor be members of thy household."⁴ The first portion of this text is examined in context of the story of Job. "Let thy house be opened wide. How? This teaches that a man's house should have a wide entrance on the north, south, east, and west, like Job's, who made four doors to his house. And why did Job make four door to his house. So that the poor would not be troubled to go all around the house, one coming from the north could enter on his way, one coming from the south could enter on his way, and so in all direction. For that reason Job made four doors to his house."⁵ The easy access of Job's home enabled the poor to readily obtain Tsedakah.

Although Job gave Tsedakah he was not as magnanimous as Abraham in this regard. Abraham exceeded the expectations of the donee while Job supplied the donee with the minimum required under the circumstances. This was brought to Job's attention at the time that he protested to God that he was not deserving of

his series of misfortunes. "Now when that great calamity came upon Job, he said unto the Holy One, blessed be He, Master of the Universe, did I not feed the hungry and give the thirsty to drink; as it is said, Or have I eaten my morsel myself alone and the fatherless hath not eaten thereof (Job 31:17)? And did I not clothe the naked, as it is said, And if he were not warmed with the fleece of my sheep (Job 31:20)?

"Nevertheless the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Job, Job you have not reached half the measure of Abraham. / You sit and tarry within thy house and the wayfarers come in to you. To him who is accustomed to eat wheat bread, you give wheat bread to eat; to him who is accustomed to eat meat, you give meat to eat; to him who is accustomed to drink wine, you give wine to drink. But Abraham did not act in this way. Instead he would go forth and make the rounds everywhere, and when he found wayfarers he brought them into his house. To him who was unaccustomed to eat wheat bread, he gave wheat bread to eat; to him who was unaccustomed to eat meat, he gave meat to eat; to him who was unaccustomed to drink wine, he gave wine to drink. Moreover he arose and built big palaces on the roads and left there food and drink, and every passerby ate and drank and blessed Heaven. That is why delight of spirit was given to him. And whatever one might ask for was to be found in Abraham's house, as it is said, And Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-Sheba (Gen. 21:33)"⁶

In addition to giving more than what was expected Abraham did not passively wait for the poor to approach his home. Unlike

Job who merely waited for the poor to arrive at his home Abraham actively sought out the poor in order to bring them into his home.

When biblical figures did practice Tsedakah they were often handsomely rewarded by God. Isaac is utilized by the Rabbis to demonstrate the rewards of Tsedakah. And Isaac sowed in that land (Gen. 26:12). "Rabbi Eli'ezer said, Did Isaac sow the seed of grain? Heaven forbid! But he took all his wealth and sowed it in Tsedakah to the poor, as it is said, Sow yourselves according to Tsedakah, reap according to Hesed (Hos. 10:12). Everything which he tithed, the Holy One, blessed be He, returned him one hundred times in money and blessed him, as it is said, And he found in the same year a hundredfold; and the Lord blessed him (Gen. 26:12)."7

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER XV

1. Ginzberg, Louis, The Legends of the Jews, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1949, vol.V, p.179.
2. Avot de Rabbi Natan, chapter 33, version A, Schechter edition.
3. Bavli, Sanhedrin 6b.
4. Mishnah, Avot 1:5.
5. Avot de Rabbi Natan, chapter 7, version A, Schechter edition.
6. Ibid.
7. Pirke de Rabbi Eli'ezer, Chapter 33.

CHAPTER XVI
RESTRICTIONS UPON THE DONEE AND
RECEIVING TSEDAKAH FRAUDULENTLY

In Chapter VIII it was explained that there were certain restrictions, expectations and obligations placed upon the donor in regard to Tsedakah. Since the donors did not have infinite resources and the needs of the poor were not completely satisfied by the existing system of Tsedakah, the Rabbis were compelled to place certain restrictions, expectations and obligations upon the donee as well.

Not every person could accept Tsedakah. One had to fall below a certain "poverty line" to be eligible. If an individual had enough food to eat, even for the short term, he could not take food or money. These resources had to be limited to those in desperate need. "If a man has food enough for two meals he may not take anything from the tamhui, and if enough for fourteen meals he may not take anything from the kupah."1

In addition to his actual food supply the Rabbis took into consideration his total financial circumstances. If a person had a minimum net worth he was ineligible to accept certain types of Tsedakah. "If a man had two hundred zuz he may not take gleanings, the forgotten sheaf, peah or the poorman's tithe; if he had two hundred less one denari and even a thousand [donors simultaneously] together gave him each [one denar], he may take [gleanings, the forgotten sheaf, peah or the poorman's tithe]."2

However, there were three exceptions to the above rule that a net worth of at least 200 zuz disqualified a potential donee from receiving from the gleanings, the forgotten sheaf, peah or the poorman's tithe. First, "if his goods were pledged to his creditor or were security for his wife's Ketubah, he may take [gleanings, the forgotten sheaf, peah or the poorman's tithe]."3 Under these circumstances, the donee's assets are frozen; he has no liquid assets to purchase the necessities of life.

Second, "if a man had 50 zuz and he traded with them, he may not take [gleanings, the forgotten sheaf, peah or the poorman's tithe]."4 In this case, an individual could be disqualified if he had as little as 50 zuz if he used them in commercial trade. We can speculate that since he was already negotiating in business, he could probably barter for his necessities during the commercial transactions.

Third, regardless of the actual wealth of the individual, he may be in transit and temporarily without any cash. "If a householder was traveling from one place to another and it became necessary for him to take gleanings, the forgotten sheaf, peah or the poorman's tithe, he may take them, and when he returns to his house he should make restitution. So [states] R. Eli'ezer, But the Sages say, [He need make no restitution because] at that time he was a poor man."5

The last sentence raises the issue of whether an individual may retain certain assets and still receive Tsedakah. Must an individual surrender virtually all of his property before he can

properly take Tsedakah? The rabbinic response: "They may not compel a man to sell his house or his articles of service."⁶ Thus, the recipient could retain his house and household furnishings and still be able to accept Tsedakah.

Nevertheless, the above exemption of a home and its furnishings could be the subject of abuse. In the Talmud is found the following rabbinic remedy to this potential problem. "We learned elsewhere: They may not compel him to sell his house or his articles of service. May he not? Was it not taught: If he was in the habit of using gold utensils he shall now use silver ones, if [he was using] silver ones let him now use copper ones"?⁷ This approach combines a sensitivity to the prior economic circumstances of the donee (see pages 82-84) with the realistic appraisal that some adjustment is inevitable when one becomes poor.

Previously in this chapter it was pointed out that generally there was a "poverty line" of 200 zuz. A mischievous or malicious person could take advantage of this rule and circumvent the spirit of Tsedakah. This is illustrated in the following text which gives examples of improper behavior. "What is a foolish pietist like? -- For example, a woman is drowning in the river, and he says, It is improper for me to look upon her and rescue her. What is the cunning rogue like? -- R. Yohanan says, He who explains his case to the judge before the other party to the suit arrives. R. Abahu says, He who gives a poor man a denar to bring his possession to two hundred zuz, for we have learnt:

He who possesses two hundred zuz may not take gleanings, forgotten sheaves, peah or the poorman's tithe; but should he lack one denar of the two hundred [zuz], even if a thousand persons give him [the gleanings, etc.] simultaneously, he may take it."8 Thus, by giving him just one denar, the donee becomes ineligible to receive a thousand denari if there were that many potential donors who were willing simultaneously to each give him one denar.

Another restriction upon a donee is if he receives the Tsedakah under certain conditions from the donor. If the Tsedakah is given for a specific purpose, then the donee is obligated to comply with that purpose. "But it is this [dictum] of R. Meir, for it has been taught: R. Shim'on b. Ele'azar said on R. Meir's authority: If one gives a denar to a poor man to buy a shirt, he may not buy a cloak therewith, to buy a cloak, he must not buy a shirt, because he disregards the opinion of the owner [donor]. But perhaps there it is different, because he may fall under suspicion. For people may say, So-and-so promised to buy a shirt for that poor man, and has not bought it, or So-and-so promised to buy a cloak for that poor man, and has not bought it! -- If so, it should state, Because he may be suspected. Why state, Because he disregards the owner's desire? This proves that it is because he makes a change, and he who disregards the owner's desire is called a robber."9

The question raised in the above rabbinic debate is whether the donor retains any ownership rights in the Tsedakah after he

has given it to the donee. If the Tsedakah is totally unconditional, the donee should be able to use the money or any other item received according to his wishes. One school of thought is that the donor's gift is conditional and that if the donee does not use the Tsedakah according to the expressed intentions of the donor he is actually stealing from the donor. The counter argument to this is that the donor does not really have any ownership interests in the Tsedakah; it was given unconditionally. However, the donee should act responsibly and not embarrass the donor. If the donor has made a promise or commitment to help an individual in a certain manner and that promise or commitment becomes known to a third party, then the donee should not take actions that would contradict the position of the donor. It should be noted that this situation would not even arise if the donor gave the Tsedakah in secret or anonymously (see pages 73-76).

An implicit expectation of every donor of Tsedakah is that the donee actually is in need of assistance. As stated above it is prohibited to take Tsedakah if one has certain economic assets, but suppose one does anyway. The Rabbis believed in divine retribution for such an act. "He that does not need to take them yet takes them shall not depart from this world before he falls in need of his fellow men; but he that needs to take them yet does not take them shall not die in old age before he has come to support others out of his own goods. Of such a one it is written, Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and

whose hope the Lord is (Jer. 17:7). And if a man is not lame or blind or halting, yet makes himself like to one of them, he shall not die in old age before he becomes like to one of them, as it is written, But he that searcheth after mischief it shall come unto him (Prov. 11:27). And again it is written, Justice justice shalt thou follow (Deut. 16:20)."¹⁰

The above sense of "poetic justice" is echoed in the thoughts of Rabbi 'Akiva. "Rabbi 'Akiva says, Whoever takes a perutah from Tsedakah when he does not need it shall not depart from this world before he falls in need of his fellow creatures.

"He used to say, He that binds rags on his eyes or his loins and cries, Give to the blind, to the afflicted, shall in the end be speaking the truth."¹¹

The Rabbis were reluctant to be victimized in their efforts to disperse Tsedakah. For example, "R. Aba used to bind some zuz in his scarf, put it on his back and place himself at the disposal of the poor. He cast his eye sideways because of rogues."¹²

One ingenious viewpoint about rogues is reflected in the following story. "R. Hanina had a poor man to whom he regularly sent four zuz on 'Erev Shabat. One day he sent that sum through his wife who came back and said to him that there was no need for it. What did you see? [She replied] I heard that he was asked, On what will you dine, on the silver linen or on the gold one? R. Hanina said, This is why R. Ele'azar said, Come let us be grateful to the rogues for were it not for them we would have

been sinning every day, for it is said, And he cry unto the Lord against thee, and it be sin unto thee (Deut. 15:9).¹³ This biblical verse indicates that it is a sin not to give Tsedakah. However, it is not a sin if in fact the "donee" is attempting to obtain Tsedakah fraudulently.

Under these circumstances the Rabbis taught that the defrauding donee will actually create a self-fulfilling prophecy. By claiming to be physically afflicted he will ultimately bring upon himself this very same affliction. "Our Rabbis taught: If a man pretends to have a blind eye, a swollen belly or a bent leg, he will not depart from this world before actually coming into such a condition. If a man accepts Tsedakah and is not in need of it, he shall in the end not depart from the world before he comes to such a condition."¹⁴

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER XVI

1. Mishnah, Peah 8:7.
2. Ibid., 8:8.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 8:9.
5. Ibid., 5:4.
6. Ibid., 8:8.
7. Bavli, Ketubot 68a.
8. Bavli, Sotah 21b.
9. Bavli, Bava Metsia 78b.
10. Mishnah, Peah 8:9.
11. Avot de Rabbi Natan, chapter 3, version A, Schechter edition.
12. Bavli, Ketubot 67b.
13. Ibid., 67b-68a.
14. Ibid., 68a.

CHAPTER XVII

TSEDAKAH AND THE GENTILE COMMUNITY

As can be seen from pages 119 through 121 there was a talmudic dispute as to whether Tsedakah by Gentiles should be viewed in a good light. One point of view was that Gentiles have evil motives such as to dominate or to shame Israel. In this perspective, Tsedakah by Gentiles is perceived as a negative phenomenon, even a sin. Rabbi Yohanan b. Zakai ultimately held that Tsedakah when practiced by Gentiles atones for their sins.

The tension in regard to these two different viewpoints is found in other rabbinic passages. For example, "When there multiplied they who accepted Tsedakah of Gentiles, Israel became on top and they below, Israel went forward and they backward."¹ This passage is capable of being understood on at least two levels. On a literal level there is a sense of gloating that perhaps Israel is exploiting those same people who are attempting to dominate her. On another level this could be a sarcastic remark in which the author regrets the humiliation of Israel accepting Tsedakah from Gentiles and being dependent upon them. The sentence then should be understood in exactly the opposite manner from what it actually says.

The anger at the Gentiles is evinced in this passage, "Rava gave the following explanation: What is the meaning, But let them be overthrown before Thee: deal thus with them in the time of Thine anger (Jer. 18:23) -- Jeremiah spoke before the Holy One, blessed be He, Lord of the Universe, even when they do Tsedakah,

cause them to be frustrated by people unworthy of any consideration so that no reward be forthcoming to them for that Tsedakah."2

One reason for the anger against the Gentiles was their ridicule of what the Rabbis deemed to be sacred. "All that ridicules the Torah and the holy and the feasts and nullifies the covenant with Abraham, our father, will not have a part of the World to Come, even if he has done good works."3

In addition, Christians and Jews during the rabbinic age did not have the same perspective towards Tsedakah. Some Jews were concerned that Christians giving Tsedakah had the ulterior motive of proselytizing poor Jews. Furthermore, Christianity did not use Tsedakah as a mechanism to create fundamental social change. Poverty was not considered as an evil which should be eradicated. Poverty, in some respects, was even praiseworthy in its ascetic quality. As discussed earlier the rabbinic view of poverty was that it degraded humanity and Tsedakah was a method of repairing the world. The Rabbis accepted that there would be both rich and poor within their society but they felt that the tensions between the various classes could be reduced by means of Tsedakah. Tsedakah could be utilized to reduce social inequalities and to strengthen the sense of mutual responsibility and community among Jews.4

Furthermore, not all the references in respect to Tsedakah are negative. For example, there is the story of Ifra Hormiz, a Gentile, who offered Tsedakah to the Jewish community. After

some debate by the Rabbis her Tsedakah was accepted. "R. Ya'akov b. Aha said in R. Asi's name: It is forbidden to help [Gentiles] or act as their agents. Rava said, We may teach them: Ifra Hormiz, the mother of King Shapur, sent an offering to Rava, saying that it should be offered in honor of Heaven. Rava said to R. Safran and R. Aha b. Huna: Go, bring two young [Gentile] men...and offer it up in honor of Heaven."5

Additionally, for the sake of peace between the two communities, Tsedakah was shared between the Jews and the Gentiles. "The poor of the Gentiles are not prevented from gathering gleanings, forgotten sheaves and the peah to avoid ill feeling. Our Rabbis taught: We support the poor of the Gentiles and the poor of Israel, and visit the sick of the Gentiles and the sick of Israel and bury the poor of the Gentiles and the poor of Israel, in the interests of peace."6

This interdependence between the Jewish and Gentile communities is also illustrated by the following text. "It was taught: In a city with Jewish and Gentile inhabitants one appoints Gentile and Israelite alms collectors and they collect from Gentiles and from Israelites. And they support the Gentile poor and the Israelite poor and visit the Gentile and the Israelite poor and bury the Gentile and the Israelite dead and comfort the Gentile and the Israelite mourners."7

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER XVII

1. Bavli, Sotah 47b.
2. Bavli, Bava Kama, 16b.
3. Avot de Rabbi Natan, chapter 35, version B, Schechter edition, p.44a.
4. Urbach, E.E., "Political and Social Tendencies in Talmudic Concepts of Charity" (Hebrew). Zion, Vol.16 (1951), pp.1-27.
5. Bavli, Zevahim, 116b.
6. Bavli, Gitin 61a.
7. Yerushalmi, Gitin 5:9, 33a.

CONCLUSION

According to our tradition belief in God shatters egocentricity. A belief in God compels one to transcend the self. The self-centered individual is precluded from establishing and maintaining a relationship with God. This relationship or covenant with God requires the Jew to be responsive to the needs of others. Tsedakah is the instrumentality to educate and sensitize the Jew in respect to the needs of others.

Over and over again the rabbinic texts that we have examined emphasize the human dignity of every individual. This is perhaps the key to understanding the rabbinic concept of Tsedakah. We all have an obligation to enhance the lives of others so that they may live in dignity. Poverty has the potential of undermining an individual's sense of dignity and self-worth. Since we have received the gift of life from God, as well as many other gifts, we have the responsibility of participating in Tikun 'Olam, the repair of the world. The system of Tsedakah as created and implemented by the Rabbis is a paradigm of how we can attack the evil of poverty in our time.

Frequently our era has been characterized as the "Me-Too" generation. The best-seller entitled The Art of Selfishness may be a symbolic representation of our modern mentality. Selfishness and its concomitant attitude of indifference to the needs of others has the potential of destroying humanity. Tsedakah has the potential of redeeming humanity.

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TRANSLITERATION SYSTEM

-	א
b, v	ב
g	ג
d	ד
h	ה
v	ו
z	ז
h	ח
t	ט
y	י
k, kh	כ
l	ל
m	מ
n	נ
s	ס
'	ע
p, f	פ
ts	צ
k	ק
r	ר
sh, s	ש
t	ת

In addition, it should be noted that no doubling of consonants was utilized except for words that have become part of the English language, such as Rabbi.