Covenant & Conversation

RE'EH • ראה

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS זצ״ל

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THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.
"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah. An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

This year's series of essays and videos were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks zt"l in 5771 (2010–2011).
These timeless messages are accompanied by a new Family Edition (2023-2024), created to inspire intergenerational learning on the *parsha*.

Making Poverty History

Listen to these stories. Behind them lies an extraordinary insight into the nature of Jewish ethics:

Story 1. Rabbi Abba used to bind money in his scarf, sling it on his back, and place it at the disposal of the poor. (Ketubot 67b)

Story 2. Mar Ukba had a poor man in his neighbourhood into whose door socket he used to throw four coins every day. Once the poor man thought, "I will go and see who does me this kindness." That day Mar Ukba stayed late at the house of study, and his wife was coming home with him. As soon as the poor man saw them moving the door [to leave the coins] he ran out after them, but they fled from him and hid. Why did they do this? Because it was taught: One should throw himself into a fiery furnace rather than publicly put his neighbour to shame. (Ketubot 67b)

Story 3. When Rabbi Jonah saw a man of good family who had lost his money and was ashamed to accept charity, he would go and say to him, "I have heard that an inheritance has come your way in a city across the sea. So here is an article of some value. Sell it and use the proceeds. When you are more affluent, you will repay me." As soon as the man took it, Rabbi Jonah would say, "It's yours to keep as a gift." (Vayikra Rabbah 34:1)

These stories are all deeply connected to the mitzvah of *tzedakah*, whose source is in this week's *parsha*:

> If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need.
>
> Deut. 15:7-8
>
> Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.
>
> Deut. 15:10-11

What we have here is a unique and still remarkable programme for the elimination of poverty.

The first extraordinary fact about the laws of *tzedakah* as articulated in the Oral Tradition is the

concept itself. *Tzedakah* does not mean "charity". We see this immediately in the form of a law inconceivable in any other moral system:

> Someone who does not wish to give *tzedakah* or to give less than is appropriate may be compelled to do so by a Jewish court of law.
>
> Maimonides, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 7:10

Charity is always voluntary. *Tzedakah* is compulsory. Therefore *tzedakah* does not mean charity. The nearest English equivalent is social justice.

The second is the principle evident in the three stories above. Poverty in Judaism is conceived not merely in material terms: the poor lack the means of sustenance. It is also conceived in psychological terms. Poverty humiliates. It robs people of dignity. It makes them dependent on others – thus depriving them of independence which the Torah sees as essential to self-respect.

This deep psychological insight is eloquently expressed in the third paragraph of the *Grace after Meals*:

> Please, O Lord our God, do not make us dependent on the gifts or loans of other people, but only on Your full, open, holy, and generous hand so that we may suffer neither shame nor humiliation for ever and all time.

As a result, Jewish law focuses not only on how much we must give but also on the manner in which we do so. Ideally the donor should not know to whom he or she is giving (story 1), nor the recipient know from whom he or she is receiving (story 2). The third story exemplifies another principle:

> If a poor person does not want to accept *tzedakah*, we should practice a form of [benign] deception and give it to him under the guise of a loan.
>
> Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 7:9

Maimonides sums up the general principle thus:

> Whoever gives charity to the poor with bad grace and averted eyes has lost all the merit of his action even though he gives him a thousand gold pieces. He should give with good grace and with joy and should sympathise with them him in his plight, as it is said, 'Have I not wept for those in trouble? Has not my soul grieved for the poor?' (Job 30:25)
>
> Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 10:4

This is the logic behind two laws that are otherwise inexplicable. The first is:

> Even a poor person who is dependent on *tzedakah* is obliged to give *tzedakah.*
>
> Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 7:5

The law seems absurd. Why should we give money to the poor so that they may give to the poor? It makes sense only on this assumption, that giving is essential to human dignity and *tzedakah* is the obligation to ensure that everyone has that dignity.

The second is this famous ruling of Maimonides:

> The highest degree of charity, exceeded by none, is when a person assists a poor Jew by providing him with a gift or a loan or by accepting him into a business partnership or by helping him find employment – in a word by putting him in a situation where he can dispense with other people's aid.
>
> Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 10:7

Giving someone a job or making him your partner would not normally be considered charity at all. It costs you nothing. But this further serves to show that *tzedakah* does not mean charity. It means giving people the means to live a dignified life, and within the Jewish value system any form of employment is more dignified than dependence.

We have in this ruling of Maimonides in the 12th century the principle that Muhammad Yunus

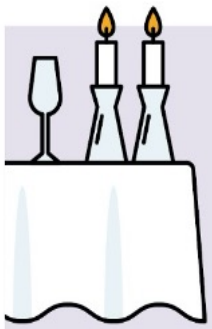
rediscovered in our time, and for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize: the idea of micro-loans enabling poor people to start small businesses. It is a very powerful idea.

In contradistinction to many other religious systems, Judaism refused to romanticise poverty or anaesthetise its pain. Faith is not what Karl Marx called "the opium of the people." The rabbis refused to see poverty as a blessed state, an affliction to be born with acceptance and grace. Instead, the rabbis called it "a kind of death" and "worse than fifty plagues". They said, "Nothing is harder to bear than poverty, because he who is crushed by poverty is like one to whom all the troubles of the world cling and upon whom all the curses of Deuteronomy have descended. If all other troubles were placed one side and poverty on the other, poverty would outweigh them all."

Maimonides went to the heart of the matter when he said:

> The well-being of the soul can only be obtained after that of the body has been secured.
>
> The Guide for the Perplexed, 3:27

Poverty is not a noble state. You cannot reach spiritual heights if you have no food to eat, no roof over your head, if you lack access to medical attention, or if you are beset by financial worries. I know of no saner approach to poverty, welfare, and social justice than that of Judaism. Unsurpassed in its time, it remains the benchmark of a decent society to this day.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. What are the key differences between charity and social justice in Judaism?
2. If you are short on funds yourself, what are some other ways you can "give tzedakah"?
3. Why do you think there is such an emphasis on preserving individual dignity when giving tzedakah?

- These questions come from this week's **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks' Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at **www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/reeh/making-poverty-history/**