



Carnegie Shul Chatter

August 4, 2021



Light candles 8:10pm

Shabbat services 9:20am

The High Holidays Are Coming

Can you believe it, the High Holidays are just a month away? And no, they are not early this year. They are always the same date on the Jewish calendar, so I guess the Julian calendar must be running late this year.

Anyway, Rosh Hashanah starts at sundown on Monday evening, September 6 (also Labor Day) and Yom Kippur starts at sundown on Wednesday, September 15.

Our wonderful guest Cantor, A.J. Edelman will be with us again this year, and we hope that you will be here too.

We were hoping that this year we would be able to have in-person services without last year's Covid protocols, but the

Covid... Again

Covid, Covid go away and don't come back any other day.

Yes, Covid is surging once again. In Florida it is worse now than it was at its peak in July of 2020. Here in Allegheny County we are again in the "substantial spread" category.

When polio was prominent in the early 1950s, Pittsburgh (and Judaism's) own Dr. Jonas Salk developed a vaccine to wipe out this terrible disease, and people everywhere flocked to get their shots. And polio was widely eliminated.

But even though Covid shots are now readily available, there are those who have decided not to get vaccinated, and Covid is not going away.

God has given us the intelligence to stop this disease. He has also told us that we must always do whatever it takes to protect our health including breaking the Yom Kippur fast to take necessary medicines.

I hope and pray that next year on the High Holidays I will not be considering Covid measures for our services yet again.

recent surge in Covid cases is prompting the Board to consider what preventive measures to take. We will be sending word of any such measures, as well as our schedule of High Holiday services, to you in the next few days. Keep an eye out for that e-mail.

In addition to our in-person services, we will also be streaming our services again this year via Zoom. We have upgraded our production capabilities, so both audio and video should be improved this year. We will also be sending out the Zoom link soon.

Re'eh in a Nutshell

Deuteronomy 11:26–16:17

“See,” says Moses to the people of Israel, “I place before you today a blessing and a curse”—the blessing that will come when they fulfill G-d’s commandments, and the curse if they abandon them. These should be proclaimed on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal when the people cross over into the Holy Land.

A Temple should be established in the place that G-d will choose to make dwell His name there,” where the people should bring their sacrifices to Him; it is forbidden to make offerings to G-d in any other place. It is permitted to slaughter animals elsewhere, not as a sacrifice but to eat their meat; the blood (which in the Temple is poured upon the altar), however, may not be eaten.

A false prophet, or one who entices others to worship idols, should be put to death; an idolatrous city must be destroyed. The identifying signs for kosher animals and fish, and the list of non-kosher birds (first given in Leviticus 11), are repeated.

A tenth of all produce is to be eaten in Jerusalem, or else exchanged for money with which food is purchased and eaten there. In certain years this tithe is given to the poor instead. Firstborn cattle and sheep are to be offered in the Temple, and their meat eaten by the kohanim (priests).

The mitzvah of charity obligates a Jew to aid a needy fellow with a gift or loan. On the Sabbatical year (occurring every seventh year), all loans are to be forgiven. All indentured servants are to be set free after six years of service.

Our Parshah concludes with the laws of the three pilgrimage festivals—Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot—when all should go to “see and be seen” before G-d in the Holy Temple.



Rabbi Jonathon Sacks on Tzedakah

On Yom Kippur, we are commanded to do Tzedakah as a way to achieve atonement. But Tzedakah is not just a concept that we discuss on Yom Kippur. As Rabbi Jonathon Sacks, z"l, tells us, Tzedakah is also a key topic in this week's parashah, Re'eh.

Re'eh (5767) – Tzedakah: The Untranslatable Virtue

TUCKED AWAY IN TODAY'S SEDRA, almost as an aside in the course of explaining the law of shemittah (the year of "release" in which debts were cancelled), is one of Judaism's most majestic institutions, the principle of tzedakah:

If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your G-d is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your poor brother. Rather, be open-handed and freely lend him sufficient for his need in that which he lacks.



Tzedakah lies at the heart of Judaism's understanding of mitzvot bein adam le-chavero, interpersonal duties. An idea going back four thousand years, it remains challenging today. To understand it, though, a brief historical note is necessary.

In a key passage in Bereishith – the only passage in which the Torah explains why G-d singled out Abraham to be the founder of a new faith – we read:

Then the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

The "way of the Lord" is defined here by two words, tzedakah and mishpat. They are both forms of justice, but are quite different in their logic. Mishpat means retributive justice. It refers to the rule of law, through which disputes are settled by right rather than might. Law distinguishes between innocent and guilty. It establishes a set of rules, binding on all, by means of which the members of a society act in such a way as to pursue their own interests without infringing on the rights and freedoms of others. Few if any civilizations have robed law with greater dignity than Judaism. It is the most basic institution of a free society. It is no coincidence that in Judaism, G-d reveals himself primarily in the form of laws, for Judaism is



concerned not just with salvation (the soul in its relationship with G-d) but also with redemption (society as a vehicle for the divine presence). A law-governed society is a place of mishpat.

But mishpat alone cannot create a good society. To it must be added tzedakah, distributive justice. One can imagine a society which fastidiously observes the rule of law, and yet contains so much inequality that wealth is concentrated into the hands of the few, and many are left without the most basic requirements of a dignified existence. There

may be high unemployment and widespread poverty. Some may live in palaces while others go homeless. That is not the kind of order that the Torah contemplates. There must be justice not only in how the law is applied, but also in how the means of existence – wealth as G-d's blessing – are distributed. That is tzedakah. Why then is it set out so briefly in the Torah itself? The answer is that the Torah is a set of timeless ideals that are to be realised in the course of time; and not all times are the same. The immediate focus of the Torah from the exodus onwards is the creation of a society in the land of Israel – the society that actually emerged from the days of Joshua to the close of the biblical era. Its economy (as were all ancient economies) was primarily agricultural. Therefore, the Torah sets out its programme of tzedakah in great detail in terms of an agrarian order.

There was the seventh year, when debts were cancelled. In the seventh year of service, slaves went free. There was the Jubilee in which ancestral lands returned to their original owners. There were the “corner of the field”, the “forgotten sheaf”, the “gleanings” of grain and wine harvest, and the tithes in the third and sixth years that were given to the poor. In these ways and others the Torah established the first form of what in the twentieth century came to be known as a welfare state – with one significant difference. It did not depend on a state. It was part of society, implemented not by power but by moral responsibility and the network of obligations created by the covenant at Sinai. It was an exceptionally beautiful structure.

But the genius of the Torah is that it does not predicate its social vision on a single era or a particular economic order. Alongside the specifics is a broad statement of timeless ideal. That is the role of the verses quoted above, which served as the basis for rabbinic legislation on tzedakah. Tzedakah refers to more than gifts of produce; it includes gifts of money – the medium of exchange in all advanced societies whatever their economic base. Thus what in biblical times was a relatively minor provision became – when Israel was no longer a nation in its own land, and when most of its people no longer lived and worked on farms – the very lifeblood of its system of distributive justice.

Maimonides, in his halakhic code the Mishneh Torah, makes a fascinating observation: “We have never seen or heard of a Jewish community without a tzedakah fund.” He adds:



We are obligated to be more scrupulous in fulfilling the commandment of tzedakah than any other positive commandment because tzedakah is the sign of the righteous, the seed of Abraham our father, as it is said, “For I know him that he will command his children to do tzedakah.” The throne of Israel and the religion of truth is upheld only through tzedakah, as it is said, “In tzedakah shall you be established” (Isaiah 54: 14). Israel is redeemed only through tzedakah, as it is said, “Zion shall be redeemed with judgement and those that return by tzedakah” (Isaiah 1: 27) . . . All Jews and those attached to them are like brothers, as it is said, “You are sons of the Lord your G-d” (Deut. 14:1), and if a brother will not show mercy to his brother, who then will have mercy on him?

Maimonides' Eight Levels of Tzedakah

1. Greatest level; Helping a person become self sufficient
2. Giver and receiver are anonymous
3. Giving anonymously to someone you know is needy
4. Giving anonymously without knowing the receiver
5. Giving directly to the needy without being asked
6. Giving sufficient amount after being asked
7. Giving a small amount cheerfully, after being asked
8. Lesser level; Giving unwillingly after being asked

Tzedakah was thus, both in ideal and reality, constitutive of Jewish community life, the moral bond between Jew and Jew (though it should be noted that Jewish law also obligates Jews to give tzedakah to non-Jews under the rubric of *darkhei shalom*, the “ways of peace”). It is foundational to the concept of covenantal society: society as an ethical enterprise constructed on the basis of mutual responsibility.

THUS FAR, deliberately, I have left the word tzedakah untranslated. It cannot be translated, and this is not accidental. Civilizations differ from one another in their structure of ideals, even their most fundamental understandings of reality. They are not different ways of saying or doing the same things, mere “garments”, as it were, covering the same basic modes of existence. If we seek to understand what makes a civilization distinctive, the best place to look is at the words that are untranslatable. Aristotle’s Athens, for example, contained the concept of the *megalopsuchos*, the “great-souled man” who, gifted with honour, wealth and rank, conducted himself with the dignity and pride that only came with such endowments. The very word is untranslatable into a system like Judaism that values humility and the kind of dignity that attaches to the person as such, regardless of their income or social position.

Tzedakah cannot be translated because it joins together two concepts that in other languages are opposites, namely charity and justice. Suppose, for example, that I give someone £100. Either he is entitled to it, or he is not. If he is, then my act is a form of justice. If he is not, it is an act of charity. In English (as with the Latin terms *caritas* and *iustitia*) a gesture of charity cannot be an act of justice, nor can an act of justice be described as charity. Tzedakah is therefore an unusual term, because it means both.

It arises from the theology of Judaism, which insists on the difference between possession and ownership. Ultimately, all things are owned by G-d, creator of the world. What we possess, we do not own – we merely hold it in trust for G-d. The clearest example is the provision in Leviticus: ‘The land must not be sold permanently because the land is Mine; you are merely strangers and temporary residents in relation to Me’ (Leviticus 25:23).

If there were absolute ownership, there would be a difference between justice (what we are bound to give others) and charity (what we give others out of generosity). The former would

celebrations. Work conditions had to be such that employees were treated with basic respect. Here, the proof text was G-d's declaration, 'For to Me the children of Israel are servants' – meaning that they were not to be treated as servants of any human being. Freedom presupposes self-respect, and a free society will therefore be one that robs no one of that basic human entitlement.

One element of self-respect is independence. This explains a remarkable feature of tzedakah legislation. Maimonides lists the various levels of giving-to-others, all except one of which involve philanthropy. The supreme act, however, does not:

The highest degree, exceeded by none, is that of one who assists a poor person 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. With reference to such aid it is said, "You shall strengthen him, be he a stranger or a settler, he shall live with you" (Leviticus 25: 35), which means strengthen him in such a manner that his falling into want is prevented.

This ruling is the result of a profound wrestling, within Judaism, with the fact that aid in the form of charity can itself be humiliating for the recipient. (One of the most powerful expressions of this is to be found in birkat ha-mazon, the Grace after Meals, when we say, "We beseech You, G-d our Lord, let us not be in need of the gifts of men or of their loans, but only of Your helping hand . . . so that we may not be put to shame nor humiliated for ever and ever"). Aid can also create welfare dependency, reinforcing, not breaking the cycle of deprivation. The greatest act of tzedakah is therefore one that allows the individual to become self-sufficient. The highest form of aid is one that enables the individual to dispense with aid. Humanitarian relief is essential on the short term, but in the long run, job creation and the promotion of employment are more important.

In this context, one detail of Jewish law is particularly fascinating. It specifies that even a person dependent on tzedakah must himself or herself give tzedakah. On the face of it, the rule is absurd. Why give X enough money so that he can give to Y? Giving to Y directly is more logical and efficient. What the rabbis understood, however, is that giving is an essential part of human dignity. As an African proverb puts it: the hand that gives is almost uppermost; the hand that receives is always lower. The rabbinic insistence that the community provide the poor with enough money so that they themselves can give is a profound insight into the human condition.

With its combination of charity and justice, its understanding of the psychological as well as material dimensions of poverty, and its aim of restoring dignity and independence, not just meeting needs, tzedakah is a unique institution. It is deeply humanitarian, but it could not exist without the essentially religious concepts of Divine ownership and social covenant. The prophet Jeremiah says of king Josiah, 'He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is this not to know Me? says the Lord.' To know G-d is to act with justice and compassion, to recognise His image in other people, and to hear the silent cry of those in need.

