

# צְדָקָה

## Tzedakah

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עִבְרִי  
BIBLICAL  
HEBREW

The Language of  
Scripture

"The obligation to help the poor and the needy and to give them gifts is stated many times in the Bible and was considered by the rabbis of all ages to be one of the cardinal *mitzvot* of Judaism." (p. 338, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 5)

One of the words for "charity" in Hebrew is צְדָקָה (tzedakah). It comes from the Hebrew root word צָדַק (tzah-dak) which primarily means "... to be just, righteous ..." (p. 702, *Gesenius Hebrew Chaldee Lexicon*) This word, when spelled צְדָקָה carries the idea of "... righteousness, piety, virtue ... welfare ..." (P. 703, *Ibid.*)

"The great rabbinical scholar and philosopher, Moses Maimonides (1135-1204 [C.E.]), devotes ten chapters in his *Mishneh Torah* to "Matnot Aniyim" (gifts to the poor). He writes: 'Anyone who can afford it must give charity to the poor according to their needs. One's duty is toward his poor relatives, then toward the needy of his town, and finally toward those of other towns. Anyone who stays in a town for thirty days shall be compelled to contribute to public charity. Any man who gives aid to the poor in a surly manner and with a gloomy face completely nullifies the merit of his own deed. Charity should be given cheerfully, compassionately and comfortably. He who induces others to contribute to charity is more deserving than they.'" (p. 77, *Fundamentals of Judaism*, Spiro)

"Maimonides spoke of eight degrees in the giving of charity, one higher than the other:

1. He who gives grudgingly, reluctantly, or with regret.
2. He who gives less than he should, but gives graciously.
3. He who gives what he should, but only after he is asked.
4. He who gives before he is asked.
5. He who gives without knowing to whom he gives, although the recipient knows the identity of the donor.
6. He who gives without making his identity known.

7. He who gives without knowing to whom he gives, neither does the recipient know from whom he receives.

8. He who helps a fellowman to support himself by a gift, or a loan, or by finding employment for him, thus helping him to become self-supporting." (*Ibid.*)

"Tzedakah is the highest ideal in Jewish teaching, for it leads to Jewish living; it leads to the application of the highest of Jewish ethical precepts." (p. 76, *Ibid.*)

Rabbi Cahn-Lippman says, "As Jews, we do not give out of the goodness of our hearts; we give because it is a mitzvah [commandment]. It

is thus different from the Christian term *charity*, which implies giving through personal generosity. Our tradition views the rich as having been given a major loan by God. It is the wealthy person's obligation to take care of the poor." (p. 367, *The Book of Jewish Knowledge*)

Yitzhak Buxbaum makes a special note about tzedakah when he wrote, "Be aware when you give charity and offer help that you

are only serving God, and be grateful to the one receiving the help for having given you the opportunity to have the joy of the mitzvah. In this way you will be able to avoid pride and a patronizing attitude, which are often joined to attempts to help others." (p. 457, *Jewish Spiritual Practices*)

The point in "giving to the poor," is that God requires it, and, requires that it be done as unto Him. Paul said of sharing with others in II Corinthians 8:12-15, "Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

Give as the LORD has blessed and commanded. The LORD loves a cheerful giver! When you give to the poor, you lend to the LORD—Proverbs 19:17.



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