

Sparks

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A Short-Cut to a Life of Blessings *You get what you give*

"Thou shalt not harden thy heart, nor shut thy hand from your needy brother; surely open thy hand to him."

— Deut. 15:7-8

Is there a short-cut to the spiritual wealth of life? One of the most powerful and immediate ways to connect the circuit of life, and let the blessings flow is *Tzedaka*, that is charity.

The Talmud teaches: "*Tzedaka* saves from death." When we need an incredible influx of life force — because we are facing impending physical death or impending spiritual death, the act of giving to charity can be one of the most powerful antidotes.

As proof for the statement, the Talmud tells the incredible story of the daughter of the famous Rabbi Akiva, who lived some 2,000 years ago. A star-gazer told Rabbi Akiva that his daughter would die on the day of her wedding. Rabbi Akiva replied that just because it is written in the stars does not mean it has to happen, because we can make choices which overturn our destinies.

As it turned out however, on the day of her wedding, the young bride was getting ready when, unbeknown to her, a poisonous snake slithered into the room and crawled up the back of her dress. Meanwhile, unaware she continued to put on her wedding bonnet. In those days, brides wore elaborate headdresses affixed by large hat pins. The snake was ready to bite her just as she inserted one pin and pierced an eye of the snake. Then she put in the other pin and it pierced the other eye of the snake and killed it.

Still unaware of what had happened, she went out to greet her father, who was shocked to see a dead snake dangling from her hair. Realizing the narrowness of her escape, he asked, "What did you do that you succeeded in saving yourself from death?"

She thought for a moment and then remembered that earlier in the day as everyone in the house was busy preparing for the wedding she heard a knock at the door. All the others were too preoccupied with their duties, but she, the bride, in the midst of beautifying herself, heard the knock at the door and took the time to answer. Standing there was a person asking for money. So she gave him a few coins.

Rabbi Akiva nodded knowingly, "*Tzedaka* saves a person from death." Why should giving a few coins have the power to save a person's life? Why is *Tzedaka* such an incredible connector to life, blessing and abundance?

To begin with *Tzedaka* is really not charity. Charity is doing something you don't have to do because you are being nice. You don't feel an obligation to give, but you want to be nice, so you'll give a few coins. That's what charity is, but that's not really *Tzedaka*.

Tzedaka really means "justice." According to justice, you must help someone who has less than you. It's not giving because you feel like giving, and want to think of yourself as sweet and generous. *Tzedaka* is an **obligation**.

By giving out of *Tzedaka*, out of justice, we *justify* our existence. Without giving, there's no reason to exist. Only by being contributing members of a community do we acquire worth. *Tzedaka* justifies our existence by demonstrating that we are a part of a community in service of a greater reality. At the same time, we recognize that what we are giving is not really our own. It's all G-d's wealth. We're just passing it on.

Torah teaches that we are responsible to acknowledge — in thought, speech and action — the blessings of life's spiritual wealth and pass them on to the world. And *Tzedaka* fulfills that function. We give each to each, because we are all members of a community. Our higher purpose in being part of a community is to acknowledge G-d as the source of all life and goodness and thereby enjoy the opportunity of being a channel for the presence of G-d into this world. The simple act of giving *Tzedaka* accomplishes that in an instant.

Winston Churchill once said, "We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give." *Tzedaka* is not being nice. *Tzedaka* is being honest. You are saying, in effect, "It's not my money. It's for me to pass it on. And the more I give away, the more I'm going to get."

Now, if you can't give it away, it's because you think it's yours and you are the source of your wealth. When you know that it's not yours, that it's only entrusted to you, you have no difficulty in passing it on.

A stingy person is like a wire trying to hold on to electricity. But isn't that crazy? Why would a wire want to hold onto electricity? Its whole purpose is to pass it on, to be a conductor of electricity. That's why a wealthy person is not a person who has a lot. A wealthy person is a person who gives a lot. A person who gives a lot understands that he is plugged into the source of all wealth. G-d is the source of blessing and wealth. The more conscious a person is of G-d as the source of wealth, the more he can become a vehicle to channel wealth into the world. But when a person holds onto money, thinking, "It's my money. It's just for me," eventually he will lose his wealth. Maybe he won't lose his money literally, but he will lose the blessing of that money. That's why when people who are experiencing financial difficulties seek the advice of a rabbi, often he will tell them, "Give more *Tzedaka*." It may sound odd. Here a person is struggling, unable to make ends meet, and the solution is to give what little he has away? But it works, because by letting it flow out one end, new resources flow in the other end.

I remember a wealthy philanthropist I met in Los Angeles. He told me that when he sold the controlling shares in one of his businesses, he put in the contract that the new owners had to give 10% of all earnings to *Tzedaka*.

In the contract negotiations the prospective buyers objected, "That's ridiculous! We've never seen anything like this. You can't put that into a contract. You're retaining only a small percentage of the shares. You can't dictate that we give away 10% of our earnings."

The philanthropist retorted, "If you don't put that into the contract, I won't sell it to you, because you'll destroy my business. The reason I have been blessed with success is that my business is a vehicle for G-d's wealth to come into the world. As long as it continues to dispense *Tzedaka*, I know it's going to continue to receive wealth, because the more it passes it on, the more it gets. I know where all this wealth is coming from."

The buyers decided not to mess with success and accepted his conditions.

A wealthy, very generous man named Joe Berman once told me something which made a deep impression on me. He said, "Very often, when people go through bad times, they ask, 'Why me?' Well, why don't people, when they go through good times, ask, 'Why me?' My whole life, I've been blessed with good times, and I've always asked, 'Why did it come to me? What am I supposed to do with it?' Because I could see that it certainly wasn't coming in just to make me rich."

Very wise advice. We all have to ask ourselves this same question: "Why me? If I have this money, why me?"

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