

Parashat Re'eh 5779, 2019:

## *Understanding the Mitzvah of Tzedakah*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The *mitzvah* of *tzedakah* — the equitable distribution of financial resources to the vulnerable among us — is one of the focal points of our *parasha*:

If there will be among you a needy person, from one of your brothers in one of your cities, in your land the L-rd your G-d is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, and you shall not close your hand from your needy brother. Rather, you shall open your hand to him... (*Sefer Devarim* 15:7-8, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), explains in the name of his paternal grandfather, Rav Chaim Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1853-1918), that the phrase, “you shall open your hand to him” constitutes the *mitzvat aseh*, the positive commandment, that obligates an individual to distribute *tzedakah* to the poor. (*Chumash Mesoras HaRav, Sefer Devarim*, page 128) As such, the preceding expression, “you shall not harden your heart, and you shall not close your hand from your needy brother,” comprises the *mitzvat lo ta'aseh*, the prohibition against acting in a miserly manner toward a fellow Jew in need. As the Rambam *zatzal* (Maimonides, 1135-1204) states:

It is a positive commandment to give *tzedakah* to the poor among the Jewish people, according to what is appropriate for the poor person, if this is within the financial capacity of the donor, as [the text] states: “You shall open your hand to him.”

Anyone who sees a poor person asking and turns his eyes away from him and does not give

him *tzedakah* transgresses a negative commandment, as [the text] states: “you shall not harden your heart, and you shall not close your hand from your needy brother.” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Matnot Aniyim* 7:1-2, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger with my emendations)

In his Torah commentary *Tzror HaMor* on our passage, the great Sephardic exegete, Rabbi Avraham Saba *zatzal* (1440-1508), builds upon these two *mitzvot* as a platform for developing our *middot* — ethical characteristics:

For what am I and what is my [so-called] strength? For it is surely the case that He [Hashem] is the One Who gives the strength [to people] so that they may perform meritorious acts. This is precisely why the Torah text states: “you shall open your hand to him,” and that you should pay no heed to any hardness of your heart [that would prevent you from fulfilling this commandment]. You absolutely must, therefore, open up your hand [to satisfy the *tzedakah* needs of your fellow Jew] — just as Hashem opens up His hand [to provide for the needs of all those in want]. (Translations and brackets my own)

Herein, Rav Saba teaches us that everything in this world, including our personal powers and abilities, are gifts from the Almighty. Moreover, he emphasizes the notion that when we respond positively to the needs of others, we emulate our Creator’s actions, an idea that is writ large in *Ashrei*: “You [Hashem] open Your hand and satisfy every living thing [with] its desire.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 145:16)

Thus far, Rav Saba has primarily focused upon the underlying nature of the *pota’ach yado* — an individual who gives *tzedakah*. Yet, how are we to understand the *kofetz yado* — one who is unwilling to give *tzedakah* to their fellow Jew? We are indeed fortunate that Rav Saba answers this question:

Our Sages teach us [*Talmud Bavli, Baba Batra* 10a] that one who closes his hand and refuses to give [*tzedakah*] to the poor is like an idol worshipper. [What is the proof for this assertion?] The text states here [in our *parasha*]: “Beware, lest there be in your heart an unfaithful thought (*davar v’liya’al*)...and you will begrudge your needy brother and not give him” (15:9), which is preceded by the phrase: “Unfaithful men (*b’nai v’liya’al*) have gone forth from among you and have led the inhabitants of their city astray, saying, ‘Let us

go and worship other gods, which you have not known.” (13:14) Just as [the first instance of v’liya’al] refers to idol worship, so, too, [does v’liya’al in reference to one who refuses to give tzedakah] teach us that he is like one who is engaged in idol worship.

How exactly is the *kofetz yado* like an idol worshipper? Rav Sabba provides us with the following trenchant psychological analysis:

...for when such an individual closes his hand and refrains from giving to the poor, he begins to feel that everything belongs to him, and that it is his strength and power — *kocho v’otzem yado* — that creates his wealth. This feeling grows until he rejects Hashem, who continuously provides him with the ability to develop and maintain his wealth. This, in turn, leads him to repudiate the totality of the Torah; as such, it is as if he is an idol worshipper.

In sum, according to Rav Sabba, the *pota’ach yado* is an individual who is keenly aware that *m’ate Hashem hayitah zot* —everything is ultimately from the Almighty. Since this is the case, we must recognize that we are the stewards of the prosperity He bestows upon us, and willingly share these funds with others less fortunate than ourselves. In so doing, we emulate the Creator and demonstrate our loyalty to His Torah.

In stark contrast, the *kofetz yado*, by refusing to give *tzedakah*, is like an idol worshipper who rejects Hashem and His holy Torah. Since he maintains that all the earthly goods he has acquired are the result of his native abilities and ongoing efforts, he comes to believe that *leit din v’leit dayan* — there is no judgment and no Judge.

With Hashem’s help and our fervent desire, may we ever be counted among those who give *tzedakah* with open hearts and open hands. And may the *zechut* (merit) of fulfilling this *mitzvah* help bring the entire Jewish people closer to the presence of the Almighty in our lives. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

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