

Parashat Re'eh 5784, 2024:

L'Shame Shamayim

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ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו כל בני ישראל, בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי הארץ

If I were to ask which one of the 248 *Mitzvot Aseh* requires the greatest amount of rigor and exactitude in its observance, I am sure there would be many different answers. Some would respond *Brit Milah* and *Korban Pesach*, as these are the only two positive *mitzvot* that have *karet* (excision) as their punishment if not fulfilled at a time when it is possible to do so. Others may suggest *Talmud Torah*, since *Chazal* famously declared, “*v'talmud Torah k'neged kulam*—and the act of *Talmud Torah* supersedes them all.” (*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 127a*) Then, too, some might propose *Kriat Shema* or *Tefilah*, since the first declares the absolute unity of the Master of the Universe and the prohibition of idol worship, and the second allows us to speak to Him as if He was standing “physically before us,” as we find in the celebrated statement: “*da lifnei Mi atah omed*—know before Whom you stand.” (Based on Rabbi Eliezer’s statement, *Talmud Bavli, Berachot 28b*)

The Rambam (1135-1204), however, suggests a different *mitzvah* that is found in our *parasha* (15:7-8, 11): “*Chayavine anu l'hizaher b'mitzvat Tzedakah yotare m'kol mitzvot aseh*—We are obligated to be punctilious in the *mitzvah* of *Tzedakah* more so than in any other Positive Commandment.” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Matnot Aniyim 10:1*) He bases his *p'sak* on *Talmud Bavli, Bava Batra 9a* and the following line of reasoning:

[This is the case, since] the act of *Tzedakah* is a sign of a righteous person, and one who is a descendant of *Avraham Avinu*. As the Torah states: “For I [Hashem] have known him [Avraham] in order that he will command his children after him *la’asot Tzedakah*—to perform acts of *Tzedakah*. (*Sefer Bereishit* 18:19) And neither will the throne of the Jewish people be established nor the true faith stand [that is, remain forever] except through *Tzedakah*. As the text states: “In *Tzedakah* you shall be established.” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 54:14) [Moreover,] the Jewish people will not be [finally] redeemed except through *Tzedakah*. As the text states: “*Tziyon* will be redeemed through judgment, and those who return to her through *Tzedakah*.” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 1:27, translations and brackets my own)

In sum, the Rambam focuses on several different aspects “*la’asot Tzedakah*”: Giving *Tzedakah* is the sign of a righteous individual and descendant of *Avraham Avinu*, the throne of the Jewish people will be established and our faith in Hashem will last forever through *Tzedakah*, and finally, the Jewish people will be redeemed as a result of our performance of *Tzedakah*.

Based on the Rambam’s opening words in this *halacha*, “*chayavine anu l’hizaher b’mitzvat Tzedakah yotare m’kol mitzvot aseh,*” I might have thought that if and only if one performs this *mitzvah l’shame shamayim* (with the intention of serving Hashem and for no other purpose), then he or she will fulfill this commandment. While this is certainly a very high level of giving *Tzedakah*, in practice, failure to perform this *mitzvah l’shame shamayim* does not prevent its fulfillment. This position is presented in the *Sefer Ba’al Shem Tov* in the name of HaRav Shmuel Kaminker *zatzal* who presented this idea before the holy Ba’al Shem Tov *zatzal* (1698-1760):

The giving of *Tzedakah* is accepted completely, and in a pleasing manner, even when the funds are not given *l’shame shamayim*. [*Tzedakah* is an outcome-driven concept, as such, we must realize] before anything else, [even when the money is not given in the ideal fashion,] the poor person will be able to eat as the result of the distributed funds. Then, too, [on the psychological level,] the poor person’s very soul is enlivened through receiving *Tzedakah*... Clearly, then, it is permissible to give *Tzedakah* even if it is not given *l’shame shamayim*. [Perhaps this is so, since] the one receiving money will always **receive** the sum [as if it were given] *l’shame shamayim*. This is the case, as the poor person is not accepting the money for the purpose of becoming enriched, *chas v’shalom*, but rather, he is only going [to ask for and receive] that which is necessary to keep both he and his family alive according to their actual needs. (Parashat Terumah, s.v. *dabare el b’nai Yisrael v’yikachu li terumah*, translation and brackets my own)

The Ba'al Shem Tov accepted this idea as *torat emet*. As such, let us remember that even if we cannot reach the level of performing the *mitzvah l'shame shamayim*, our fulfillment is not diminished, since in the heart of the recipient, it will be accepted *l'shame shamayim*.

Shabbat Shalom

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