

Tzedakah: Charity

Charity is a fundamental part of the Jewish way of life.

Traditional Jews give at least ten percent of their income to charity. Traditional Jewish homes commonly have a *pushka*, a box for collecting coins for the poor, and coins are routinely placed in the box. Jewish youths are continually going from door to door collecting for various worthy causes. According to Jewish tradition, the spiritual benefit of giving to the poor is so great that a beggar actually does the giver a favor by giving a person the opportunity to perform tzedakah.

The Obligation of Tzedakah

Giving to the poor is an obligation in Judaism, a duty that cannot be forsaken even by those who are themselves in need. Some sages have said that tzedakah is the highest of all commandments, equal to all of them combined, and that a person who does not perform tzedakah is equivalent to an idol worshipper. Tzedakah is one of the three acts that gain us forgiveness from our sins. The High Holiday liturgy states that God has inscribed a judgment against all who have sinned, but teshuvah (repentance), tefilah (prayer) and tzedakah can reverse the decree.

According to Jewish law, we are required to give one-tenth of our income to the poor. This is generally interpreted as one-tenth of our net income after payment of taxes. Those who are dependent on public assistance or living on the edge of subsistence may give less; no person should give so much that he would become a public burden.

The obligation to perform tzedakah can be fulfilled by giving money to the poor, to health care institutions, to synagogues or to educational institutions. It can also be fulfilled by supporting your children beyond the age when you are legally required to, or supporting your parents in their old age. The obligation includes giving to both Jews and gentiles; contrary to popular belief, Jews do not just "take care of our own."

Levels of Tzedakah

Certain kinds of tzedakah are considered better than others. The Talmud describes these different levels of tzedakah and organizes them into a list:

1. Giving with a heavy heart
2. Giving less than you should, but giving it cheerfully.
3. Giving after being asked
4. Giving before being asked
5. Giving when you do not know the recipient's identity, but the recipient knows your identity
6. Giving when you know the recipient's identity, but the recipient doesn't know your identity
7. Giving when neither party knows the other's identity
8. Enabling the recipient to become self-reliant, helping him to get education, job.

Test yourself:

What is the Hebrew word for "Charity"?

What is the highest way of charity?

How do we practice charity from very young age?
