

2nd day Rosh Hashanah sermon

2 Tishrei 5761 (Oct. 1, 2000)

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Each of my sermons over these High Holidays will focus on a misunderstood word or phrase from the High Holiday prayers. And this morning's sermon is all about one particular word that is so often misunderstood and mistranslated.

But before I tell you what the word is, let me tell you a story.

One of my colleagues, Rabbi Sam Chiel of Newton, MA, tells of how he was once invited to the dedication of the new home of a couple in his congregation. So he arrived for an elegant dinner party in this beautiful and impeccably decorated new home. And the elderly mother of the wife of this couple lived in the house with them. And midway through the party, she took the rabbi by the hand and said, "Come upstairs with me. There's something I want to show you." And they went up to her room -- and the first thing he noticed was that every available surface -- all the tables, all the windowsills -- was filled with tzedakah boxes. Collection boxes from at least two dozen charities -- from the United Jewish Appeal, to Pioneer Women, to the Jewish National Fund, to United Way, and so many others. And the woman looked at the rabbi and in a Yiddish accent, she said: "Now THIS is interior decorating!"

I was entertained and moved by this story the first time I heard it -- maybe because it reminded me of the Tzedakah boxes of my youth and made me think about our family's Tzedakah boxes today. A couple of months ago, Naomi and I started to give coins to Adina to put them in the Tzedakah box every Friday right before Shabbat. And now, when Adina finds a coin, she thinks it belongs in the Tzedakah box. And it suddenly occurred to me - that it's very likely that her first memory of money will be -- putting it in the Tzedakah box. She doesn't realize right now what she's doing, but perhaps these early memories will help her to come to view **this** as the primary purpose of money - to help others. And come to think of it, (and my parents are here this holiday and they can vouch for this) - thanks to them, I was also putting coins in the tzedakah box long before I ever knew that money was for spending, buying toys and candy with. And I imagine the same is true about many of us here. For so many centuries, Tzedakah has been a nearly automatic Jewish value.

I recently came across a study by some sociologists from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill - they were studying how religion influences charitable giving in the United States. And this study, which was published in 1998, discovered some pretty amazing things. I'd like to share three of its conclusions with you. First of all, the more religious a person is, the more likely he or she is to contribute a higher percentage of his or her income to charity. It's that simple. Of course, there are people who are completely secular who give a lot to charity, but on the whole, becoming less religious usually results in becoming less charitable with one's money. (And by the way, this is why I think Senator Lieberman had a point when he said that there are important links

between religion and morality -- in that speech that he gave that got him into trouble with the Anti-Defamation League. But I digress.)

Second, mainstream Catholics and Protestants are slightly more likely to give to charity than those who describe themselves as non-religious. Of all the Christian groups, it's the evangelical Christians who are the most charitable. And the third thing, which may or may not be surprising. In terms of charitable giving in the United States, Jews blow everyone else out of the water. (not to be competitive or anything.) Jews have a dramatically higher rate of charitable giving than any other religious group in the United States. It's no surprise, when you consider how ingrained the value of *tzedakah* is in Jewish tradition! For me, reading this study was one of those "proud-to-be-Jewish" moments.

But, it's also a disappointing comment on our world today. Granted, Americans are giving more to charity now than at any point in American history -- and the United States has far and away the greatest rate of charitable giving on earth. But we are still a long way off from a time when charitable giving is as automatic a value in our general society as it is in Jewish tradition.

I recently came across an article about philanthropy among the new "super-rich" of Silicon Valley -- about how so many of the young entrepreneurs there have waited until they made their first 10 million - or their first hundred million - before giving anything to charity -- in part because thinking about charitable giving was not something that they had ever really done before. It was not something they were trained to do -- not something they ever did as kids -- it was only when they started to be lambasted in the press for not giving that they decided to start giving...

And our society certainly has its share of multi-millionaires and prominent politicians who give far less than 1% of their income to charitable organizations. And it's especially jarring when these same politicians are the ones who say that more of the responsibility for caring for the neediest members of the society should fall not upon the government, but upon private charities! -- perhaps this political ideology would have more credibility if more of the people who express it were more generous in their own giving.

Now I know that some people get turned off by the Jewish focus on *tzedakah*. Some people find it off-putting. It sometimes comes across as seeming like a pre-occupation with money. Or even reflecting materialistic priorities. This is disheartening and surprising to me, because the Jewish doctrine of *Tzedakah* is actually about as ANTI-MATERIALISTIC as you can get. I would go so far as to say that a traditional Jewish perspective on *Tzedakah* is a radically different way of understanding the concepts of property, and responsibility, and community. Let me share with you what I mean.

The first important thing to note about *Tzedakah* is that it is one of those Hebrew words that cannot be adequately translated. Sure, people often translate *tzedakah* as "charity." I do it myself sometimes. But that's not really what *tzedakah* means. The word "charity" comes from the Greek word 'caritas,' meaning love. A charitable act happens when I, of my own free will, give something to someone else, out of my sheer love for them.

That's a wonderful idea - but it's different from *tzedakah*. Because the word *tzedakah* means "justice." When we give *tzedakah* to someone who is needy, we're not necessarily doing it out of an act of love. We're giving because it's **just**. The Jewish concept of Tzedakah tells us: A certain percentage of my funds doesn't actually belong to me. A certain percentage of my paycheck doesn't actually belong to me. - It belongs to the needy, and I have been entrusted to make sure it gets there. It's an obligation - a responsibility - not just an act of love. Because the well-being of the neediest members of a society is just too important to let it be dependent upon other people's feelings of love and generosity.

Let me give you an example of how this difference between 'charity' and *tzedakah* plays out in the real world. I have had the opportunity to study the writings of Moses Maimonides on *tzedakah* with many of you - it is one of my favorite texts from Rabbinic literature. Very often, people who read Maimonides on *tzedakah* are amused that, no less than 4 times in just a few paragraphs, he emphasizes that when one contributes to a charitable fund, one must be very careful that, its managers act responsibly with the funds they receive. Why is he so concerned about that? It sounds like such a petty concern! If I give some money to a fund, and the fund is mismanaged, so only a small portion of it gets to the needy, I'm still helping people, right? I haven't really done anything wrong. I have just missed an opportunity to do better! But, in fact, from the perspective of *tzedakah*, such a contribution is a big problem. Remember -- a portion of my paycheck doesn't belong to me - it belongs to needy individuals and the needy organizations that serve them. And if I give to an organization that is run irresponsibly, it is as if I am misappropriating money that really belongs to the needy. And this is the reason why there's a member of our congregation who has told me that among his earliest memories were his father sitting at the kitchen table, reading annual reports from all the charities he gave to. You would think he was auditing them! -- but actually, he was just studying them to make sure that he was, in fact, fulfilling his *mitzvah* of giving to *tzedakah*.

Additionally -- if *tzedakah* is an act of justice--not just a benign good deed -- then it makes a lot of difference how we give *tzedakah*. Almost 1,000 years ago, Moses Maimonides taught us that not all acts of Tzedakah are equal to one another. The highest form of *tzedakah* comes not in the form of gifts, but in the form of loans, partnerships, and job training -- because these are the methods that are most likely to help to lift people out of cycles of dependence. The notion that a "hand up" is preferable to a "hand-out" has been part of Jewish wisdom for so many years.

And also, we must not underestimate the power that Tzedakah has on the giver, as well as on the receiver. The story is told in the Midrash that Hillel, one of the greatest of our sages of ancient times, once asked his students: "If I have 1,000 dinars, and I give away 300 of them to the needy, how much do I have?" The students answered: "Obviously, you have 700 left." To which the teacher responded: "No. "Your math is good - but you don't understand *tzedakah*. I don't really have the 700 dinars - I could lose it by accident, or in a business venture, or, with luck, I might be able to leave it to my children. But -- for the rest of my life - I **KNOW** I have the 300 dinars. I can always, even at the moment of my death, look back on those 300 dinars that I contributed to

tzedakah and know that it was something that I did that really helped the world. So the answer to the question is: if, of 1000 dinars I give away 300 dinars, the amount that I most truly "have" is 300 dinars."

A similar story is told by the Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis about a friend of hers who grew up in a very wealthy and generous Jewish family in the Midwest, during the '20s and '30's. During the 1920's, his father gave very generously to charity -- making a gift of \$75,000 to one charitable organization.. And then in 1929, the family lost absolutely everything in the stock market crash. And as a teenager, during the '30's, Rebbetzin Jungreis' friend asked his father, "Dad, can you imagine how great it would be if you still had that \$75,000 that you contributed to charity in the past?" And his father looked at him, sternly, and said, "Son, I'm going to tell you something now, and never forget it. The only money that I DO have now is those \$75,000 that I gave away. And especially now, my only regret is that I didn't give away more."

It is not what we have, but what we give, that adds meaning and purpose to our lives. While Tzedakah is associated with the material world, a commitment to the values of Tzedakah is an important part of a commitment to Jewish spirituality. In the words of the great sage, Rabbi Israel Salanter, "the material concerns of those around me become my spiritual concern." And a serious commitment to tzedakah is a gesture that says: I express my Jewish identity not just in my home and my synagogue, but with my bank statement and my investments and my tax return. It's an important way that we can invite God to be present in the seemingly mundane and secular details of our lives. It's a way for us to acknowledge the interrelatedness of all of creation -- it helps us to understand that our primary human task is to assist others.

Our community has its share of major league Tzedakah heroes. But I would venture to say that many of us could stand to re-dedicate ourselves to the Mitzvah of Tzedakah for the coming year. And I would like to give you some suggestions for doing so. But let me first say something that may be surprising. It is, of course, a very important Jewish obligation to support synagogues and communal institutions. But, believe it or not, this obligation is separate and different from the obligation of Tzedakah, which relates expressly to supporting needy individuals and the organizations that help them.

Let me point out just three organizations for which you can find information in your Machzor. First, the Jewish Family and Counseling Service, which is the first stop for people in the Jewish community in Hudson County who are in need or in crisis. In addition to providing counseling, it distributes kosher meals to the home-bound and hosts our region's only Kosher food pantry for the needy. You also have information about the United Jewish Communities, providing support for needy Jews and the institutions that serve them, around the country and around the world. And third, you have information from Mazon - a Jewish-sponsored hunger organization, providing hunger relief to Jews and non-Jews throughout the world. Of course, our Yom Kippur Food Drive takes place every year, in conjunction with Mazon, and that is a wonderful *tzedakah* opportunity.

But please, don't let one bag of groceries be one of your primary acts of tzedakah this year -- or even this month. Let it be just the beginning. And of course, a gift of time may be even more valuable and more appreciated than a gift of money! If you contact the synagogue after Yom Kippur, we can help you find a volunteer opportunity that suits your interests and your time.

If it seems like the choices are overwhelming, that's because they are. But remember the quotation from Pirkei Avot - the Ethics of the Fathers. It is not up to you to complete the work. The problems of the world do not fall solely on your shoulders. However, Each of us is not exempt from doing whatever we can.

Let me conclude with a story by the American Jewish writer Hugh Nissenson, describing the moment when he first truly understood the Mitzvah of Tzedakah. He grew up on the Lower East Side in the early years of this century. His family lived in a one-room flat -- I'm sure many of us had parents, or grandparents, or great-grandparents, who lived in similar modest conditions on the Lower East Side. But whatever they had, they made sure to share -- each Friday, his father would comb the streets to find needy people to share their modest Shabbat dinner, and then to spend the night in their home, sleeping on the floor by the stove, covered with a blanket.

Young Hugh Nissenson was pretty annoyed by this - these guests were usually old men who did not necessarily make personal hygiene a major priority, and their snoring often kept him awake at night. But when he would complain to his father, his father would say, "Shh! Remember what the book of Proverbs says: "Tzedakah saves from death."

One winter, when Hugh was about 11 years old, his mother became ill with pneumonia. And one Friday afternoon, she took a turn for the worse. The doctor recommended that she be hospitalized. And as they were making the arrangements to get the ambulance to bring her to the hospital, Hugh's father exclaimed, "Hugh! I nearly forgot. You will have to do the shopping for Shabbes dinner, because we're having a guest. Remember - Tzedakah saves from death."

And Hugh was so perplexed that on this day, of all days, when his mother was going into the hospital, that his father was still planning to invite a needy person into their home for Shabbat dinner. But then, over the course of doing the shopping, it became clear to young Hugh. *This* was the meaning of that verse that my father always quotes - tzedakah saves from death. God would look down and see that even at this moment of crisis, they were engaged in the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*. This *mitzvah* would not go unrewarded. Finally, he felt that he understood.

Later that night, Hugh and his father had a quiet Shabbat dinner with their guest, an unemployed Hebrew teacher who lived in an unheated room behind a synagogue. He was extremely appreciative of their hospitality and for the first real meal he had eaten in several days. That night, neither Hugh nor his father could sleep. First of all, the guest was snoring, and his breath still smelled like the fish they had eaten for dinner. But also, they were thinking about Hugh's mother in the hospital. Hugh said to his father, "don't

worry. Mama will get well." And his father responded, "How can you be so sure?"
"Papa! You said so yourself! Charity saves from death!"

His father responded, "What's that got to do with Mama? Is that what you think a *mitzvah* is? A bribe offered the Almighty?"

"But Papa! you said so. You said that charity saves from death!"

And his father glanced at their sleeping guest. "No, not Mama! Him." "No, not Mama!
Him."

May your new year be blessed with prosperity, together with the joy of giving, and the blessing of generosity. And in partnership with God may your *tzedakah* help to heal some of the brokenness of our world.

Shanah Tovah!!

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