

Tzedakah and Philanthropy: Rethinking American Jewish Giving

LARRY S. MOSES

In contemporary human rights studies, a distinction is often made between the “cosmopolitan” and “communitarian” frameworks. The former places a premium on responding to the immediacy of suffering wherever it occurs, and the latter focuses upon the systemic changes needed to eradicate such suffering. This tension might be thought of as the difference between the emergency room and the research department of a medical center. One stops the bleeding; the other strives to cure the disease.

This spectrum of activism may be a useful prism for looking at the fundamental differences between *tzedakah* in its classical formulation and Jewish philanthropy as it has emerged in American life.

Tzedakah, derived from the biblical mandate, “*Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*” (“Justice, justice, you shall pursue”), literally means “righteousness” or “justice.” It constitutes an incumbent obligation. Situated squarely in the realm of being commanded, *tzedakah* is an act the donor has a duty to perform and the recipient has a right to receive.

The rabbis defined *tzedakah* in painstaking detail. Generally, *tzedakah* is directed to the poor, the hungry, and others who cannot meet their basic human needs. The prime consideration in giving *tzedakah* is to uphold the dignity and self-esteem of the recipient, and the priorities for giving are ordered in concentric circles, starting from the most personal and proximate. The highest giving priority is to tend to one’s immediate family, then to one’s extended family, one’s community, other communities, one’s country, and the world. Tradition stipulates that giving 10 percent of one’s income “minimally” fulfills the command to perform acts of *tzedakah*; 20 percent is better. All are commanded to give, even those who are supported by *tzedakah* themselves. Maimonides, the foremost medieval Jewish philosopher, posed the idea of eight rungs on the ladder of *tzedakah* — from giving grudgingly, the lowest rung; to lending a person funds, a higher rung; to teaching a person how to be self-sufficient, the highest rung. But even if one performs acts of *tzedakah* grudgingly, one is nevertheless obligated to give. As the late Yale University legal scholar Robert M. Cover taught, giving out of a

sense of obligation, as opposed to voluntary giving, is “the closest thing there is to a Jewish definition of completion as a person...” Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive.

The Babylonian Talmud teaches that non-Jews are also to benefit from *tzedakah* “for the sake of the paths of peace.” (Gittin 61a) The esteemed Orthodox Torah scholar Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik framed the tension between giving to Jews and non-Jews as follows: “We believe we are the bearers of a double charismatic load, that of the dignity of man, and that of the sanctity of the covenantal community.”

The ancient Greek word “philanthropy” means “the love of humankind.” It typically describes a voluntary or private act to achieve a public good. American philanthropy took root in the late 19th century and, increasing regulation notwithstanding, its independent foundations remain fundamentally non-democratic; they are usually chartered for the sole purpose of carrying out the personal philanthropic goals of the donor.

The hallmark of American Jewish philanthropy has been the “federal” idea, exemplified by Jewish federations and community foundations. In more recent decades, independent Jewish foundations have emerged as a new force in Jewish philanthropy. The juxtaposition of Jewish communal philanthropy (centralized federation giving) and independent philanthropy has created a new landscape for giving. And, of course, many Jews give abundantly to more civic and universal causes as well.

While centralized giving in Jewish life loosely evokes the spirit of *tzedakah*, contemporary Jewish giving mainly consists of voluntary acts motivated by personal priorities in amounts largely determined by the donor. This is in sharp contrast to the ancient idea of *tzedakah* in its classical form. However, the two forms of *tzedakah* converge in their emphasis on the priority of local giving.

The interplay between *tzedakah* in its traditional formulation and Jewish philanthropy as it is practiced today prompts a rethinking of American Jewish giving and the imposing of a set of important questions:

- How can the Jewish community strengthen



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Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, speaks about **tzedakah & philanthropy**:
www.sjfcf.org/groups/blc/2010/breakfast.asp#Sandberg.

its local, centralized, consensus-driven system of giving in an age of individualism, mobility, fragmentation, acculturation, and globalization?

- How can Jewish communal culture more strongly embrace and value the giving of time, service, and forms of “giving” other than gifts of money?
- How do we prioritize the needs of Jews and non-Jews in our giving?
- Can American Jewish philanthropy reclaim the idea of giving funds, time, and service as a matter of *obligation* rather than as a matter of personal discretion and virtue? If so, what would the concentric circles of giving look like in the world of

the contemporary Jew?

- To whom are independent Jewish foundations accountable, and how might they more strategically align themselves with each other and with the larger Jewish communal structure?

These are questions we must face in forging the future. *Tzedakah* teaches us what is required to be fully human. Philanthropy teaches us what is possible in recognizing God’s image in the world around us and in repairing that world. New thinking and strong leadership will be required for today’s American Jewish community to learn to honor such a noble heritage and to fulfill such promising possibilities. 

The New Social Economy: A Broader Mix of Players

LUCY BERNHOLZ

What does it mean to be Jewish and philanthropic in 2011? Larry Moses wisely addresses this question from the perspective of the Jewish tradition of *tzedakah*. I am not a religious scholar; I am a philanthropy wonk. I study, write about, and consult with philanthropists on the changing ways we can create, fund, and distribute shared social goods such as education, health services, elder care, and cultural and artistic endeavors. My perspective on this question is to look at the modern business of giving, and to seek to apply those tools to the pursuit of justice.

Moses notes, “The interplay between *tzedakah* in its traditional formulation and Jewish philanthropy as it is practiced today prompts a rethinking of American Jewish giving.” He asks us to consider how the different elements of giving — from charitable to strategic, from individual to institutional, or, to borrow his metaphor, from emergency room to medical research center — fit together. He leaves us with several enticing questions about institutional philanthropy and *tzedakah*. I am as interested as he is in the discussion of those questions, though I think we must expand our vision to the broader social economy. This economy encompasses the full range of private financial, institutional and individual sources that we use to create shared social goods. In the social economy, it is not enough to consider only the interplay between our charitable dollars and justice; we should also

actively question the roles of our investment capital (the impact investing movement), our workplace structures (the social business movement), our shopping choices (embedded giving), and our contributions of time and wisdom.

In the past 20 years, institutional philanthropy in the United States has become big business. Between 1990 and 2009, the number of foundations more than doubled from 32,000 to 76,000 and their assets increased fourfold. While foundations are large and important, they represent a small portion of total giving and involve relatively few decision makers and recipients. Most of the \$300 billion that Americans give each year comes through small, direct donations to religious, educational, and social services organizations.

But these aggregate measures of giving don’t capture the complete picture of how we fund social goods. The measures omit the value of volunteer time, the role of social businesses, the rapidly emerging world of social finance, and the new forms of social change being birthed by mobile connectivity that are not yet enshrined in tax law.

Philanthropy is more than foundations, and the private economy that funds social goods is more than philanthropy. The social economy is framed by market-based assumptions and the reality of global connectivity. These two forces — new enterprise structures, and the ability to connect to anyone, anywhere, at any time — are not

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