

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Behar-Bechukotai  
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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Behar-Bechukotai – levels of tzedakah

In this week's double Parsha of Behar-Bechukotai we learn about the important mitzva of tzedakah and helping to prevent poverty amongst our fellow Jews.

*If your brother becomes destitute and his hand falters beside you, you shall support him, whether a convert or a resident, so that he can live with you. (Parshat Behar, Vayikra 25:35)*

Rashi explains that the pasuk is discussing the case of a person who has begun to suffer financial difficulties. It is usually easier to help someone who has just started to become poor than when they become bankrupt. A temporary loan can often be enough to help someone get through a difficult period. Rashi compares this to a heavy load on a donkey. If the load starts to fall, even one person can grab it and hold it in place. However, once the heavy load falls to the ground it may need five or more people to pick it up again.

The Artscroll<sup>1</sup> commentary to this verse points out that the person suffering financially is referred to as “your brother”. When a fellow Jew is going through a difficult time, we need to look upon them as a close relative because in reality all Jews are related.

Let's have a closer look at the mitzva of tzedakah.

One of the 613 mitzvot is the mitzva to emulate Hashem.<sup>2</sup> The Gemara<sup>3</sup> provides us with some practical guidance as to how to do this. Just as Hashem clothes the naked<sup>4</sup>, visits the sick<sup>5</sup>, comforts the bereaved<sup>6</sup> and buries the dead<sup>7</sup>, we should also do these things. Hashem's 13 attributes that we recite at various times (e.g. during Selichot and particularly on Yom Kippur) gives us more insight into how Hashem relates to the world. For example, He is compassionate, slow to anger, truthful, forgiving. We see that Hashem acts towards us with kindness and compassion and we are commanded to do the same when interacting with each other.

One of the ways that we emulate Hashem is by giving tzedakah. By its definition, tzedakah means to give something to someone who is lacking. That is precisely what Hashem does. He gives us everything that we need. Indeed, Hashem's very name demonstrates the act of giving. The small 'Yud' of Hashem's name represents a coin. The first letter 'Heh' represents the hand of the giver (the numerical value of 'Heh' is 5, representing the 5 fingers of the hand). The long 'Vav' represents the outstretched arm of the giver as they reach towards the recipient. And the final 'Heh' represents the hand of the recipient, opened up to receive the coin. Thus, when we give tzedakah to a poor person, we are essentially emulating Hashem and acting out His name.

The Rambam<sup>8</sup> teaches that there are eight levels of tzedakah, listed in order of ascending greatness.

- 1 Giving unwillingly
- 2 Giving inadequately, but gladly and with a smile
- 3 Giving after being asked
- 4 Giving directly to the poor person but before being asked

<sup>1</sup> Stone edition Chumash.

<sup>2</sup> This mitzva is number 611 in the list of mitzvot presented in the Sefer Hachinuch.

<sup>3</sup> Sotah 14a.

<sup>4</sup> For example, he clothed Adam and Chava after their sin when they realised that they were naked.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Hashem visited Avraham when he was recovering from his brit milah (see the beginning of Parshat Vayera).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Hashem blessed and comforted Yitzchak after the death of Avraham (see Parshat Chayai Sarah, Breishit 25:11).

<sup>7</sup> For example, Hashem attended to Moshe's burial (see Parshat V'zot Habracha, Devarim 34:6).

<sup>8</sup> Hilchot Matanot Aniyim (10:7-14).

- 5 Giving without knowing to whom one gives
- 6 Giving without the recipient knowing your identity
- 7 Giving totally anonymously (e.g. putting money into a tzedakah box)
- 8 The highest level of tzedakah is giving a **loan** to a poor person, or entering into a **partnership** with them, or finding them a **job**, in order to strengthen their hand until they no longer need to be dependent on others.<sup>9</sup>

One factor that distinguishes each level is the extent of the personal embarrassment or shame suffered by the recipient. Higher levels of tzedakah are characterised by a potentially lower level of embarrassment suffered by the recipient. Thus, the highest form of tzedakah is when we help someone to help themselves. They become self-reliant and independent rather than just relying on others. This reduces their feeling of shame and neediness and increases their feelings of self-worth.

We mentioned earlier that Hashem gives tzedakah and when we give tzedakah, we are emulating Hashem. But what level of tzedakah does Hashem give? Where is Hashem holding (so to speak) in the 8 levels of tzedakah? To answer this question, we need to understand why Hashem created the world.<sup>10</sup>

Hashem didn't create the world for His own benefit since Hashem doesn't lack anything. Rather, Hashem created the world in order to give to us for our benefit. Hashem wants to give us the greatest pleasure possible. Any pleasure that we enjoy in this finite, limited, physical world must by definition also be limited. Hashem offers us a much greater pleasure than that. The greatest pleasure that we can attain is the pleasure of attaching ourselves to Hashem. We can experience this pleasure in the World to Come, and to some extent even in this world. However, just as reducing the shame of the tzedakah recipient elevates our tzedakah, so too receiving from Hashem with less shame increases our pleasure. How does Hashem minimise our shame and maximise our pleasure? By giving us the chance to **earn** our reward.

When we work for something and earn it, we feel a sense of accomplishment and achievement. This provides us with an intrinsic feeling of pride and self-worth, which is much more satisfying and lasting than a superficial gift. And this principle extends to earning our relationship with our Creator too.

Therefore, in Hashem's wisdom, He gives us the 8<sup>th</sup> level of tzedakah! (Pay attention to the words in **bold and underline** below which match the words in bold which are brought above in the description of the 8<sup>th</sup> level of tzedakah.) He created a physical world and he sends our neshamas down to this world. Hashem then:

- **lends** the neshama what it needs - i.e. a body (which needs to be returned after 120 years) plus everything that the body needs to function - food, clothes, oxygen, energy
- gives the neshama a **job** with a detailed job description - i.e. to keep the mitzvot and to fulfil our own tafkid (purpose) in the world
- makes each of us His **partner** - i.e. we 'help' Hashem to clothe the poor, care for the downtrodden etc.

He loans us what we need, gives us a job and makes us His partner so that we can **earn** our reward and feel a sense of accomplishment rather than a sense of shame. In this way we will not feel ashamed, both when we enjoy a connection to Hashem in this world and when we receive our reward in the World to Come.

When we give tzedakah, we are emulating Hashem. And when we give tzedakah at the highest level, we are emulating Hashem even more closely, by giving in the best way possible, just as He gives to us.

Let's try something this week:

1. When handing over a coin for tzedakah, try to be aware of the fact that we are emulating Hashem and literally acting out His name.
2. When you give someone tzedakah try to emulate Hashem's way of giving to us by doing it in a way that reduces their shame and maximises their self-sufficiency and their feelings of self-worth.
3. When someone asks us for tzedakah, remember that they are enabling us to emulate and connect to Hashem. They are actually giving us more than we are giving them!

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>9</sup> Pay attention to the words that are in **bold and underline** in this 8th level of tzedakah. They will be referred to again shortly.

<sup>10</sup> This is obviously a very broad topic and we will merely touch on it here. See the Ramchal's *Derech Hashem*, Chapter 2 for further details.

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The pasuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace". The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parashah, usually relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem's help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of 'v'ahavta l're'echa kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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