

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Re'eh, September 2016

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Re'eh – tithing our time

This week's Parsha of Re'eh includes the mitzvah of giving tzedaka.

“If there shall be a destitute person amongst one of your brothers, in one of your cities, in the land that Hashem your G-d gave you, you shall not harden your heart or close your hand against your destitute brother. Rather you shall surely open your hand to him...”
(Devarim 15:7-8)

Giving tzedaka is a special and fundamental part of Judaism. We are commanded to give between 10% and 20% of our earnings to help those who are less fortunate than us. Hashem guarantees that we will be repaid and He challenges us to test Him in this matter (see Malachi 3:10).

The following story illustrates the Jewish approach to tzedaka:¹

A meshulach (tzedaka collector) from Israel was travelling through the US collecting money for needy brides. At one point he was pulled over by a policeman for unknowingly breaking a local driving law. He was unfamiliar with local practices. When told that he would have to pay a fine he immediately pulled out a thick wad of cash and asked the policeman how much he had to pay. The policeman was very suspicious when he saw such a large amount of cash so he took him down to the station for questioning. The man's story was not believable. “Do you mean to say that you approach total strangers and they willingly hand over cash to pay for weddings in another country for brides that they don't know and that you don't know!?!” The police checked him out and found out that the story was true. It was a wonderful demonstration of the Jewish approach to tzedaka and became a huge kiddush Hashem.

This story illustrates the mitzvah of tithing our money. However, there is also the idea that we are obligated to tithe our time. In June 1973, Rav Moshe Feinstein issued a call to action to Yeshiva students, asking them to devote 10% of their time to learn Torah with their fellow Jews who had become estranged from Judaism.² Rav Feinstein relied on the precedent of ma'aser (tithing of money) to designate an appropriate amount of time to spend on such activities. Just like we need to generously assist those that are financially suffering, we also need to generously assist others in a spiritual sense.

Let's try to extrapolate the laws of tithing our money and apply them to tithing our time.

Reuven answered the knock on his door and to his dismay he saw a meshulach collecting charity. Embarrassed, Reuven looked at the ground. “This is so awkward,” he said. “I really don't know why you came to me. To be honest, I'm not financially successful. Since I can only afford to give you a modest sum, please don't waste your

¹ I don't know whether or not this story is true, but in any case I think it's a wonderful story!

² The call to action was published in the Jewish Observer and a copy of the article can be seen here: <http://judaism.stackexchange.com/questions/48828/rav-moshe-and-giving-your-time-for-charity>

time with me. Why don't you visit my next door neighbour instead? He is much wealthier than me and will give you much more than I can."

Of course Reuven's reasoning is illogical. The meshulach will certainly visit Reuven's neighbour as well. Just because his neighbour can give more than Reuven, does not absolve Reuven of his obligation to contribute. Perhaps Reuven's contribution will only pay for one meal for the poor recipient while Reuven's neighbour will be able to cover the rent for a couple of months. But it all adds up and every contribution helps!

Another significant factor is to focus on Reuven and his spiritual gain. If Reuven backed out of doing the mitzva of tzedaka just because someone else could do it better, he is missing out on seizing the opportunity for reward and spiritual growth himself. He would be letting this precious mitzva slip through his fingers.

Let's now apply these concepts to tithing our time. Many people believe that they are not qualified to teach Torah. They may feel inept and embarrassed if someone suggested that they contribute to spreading Torah. They may assume that communal Rabbis and professional teachers are responsible for these matters. However this line of reasoning is false. Just as every cent that Reuven contributed would benefit the beggar regardless of how much more his neighbour could donate, so too every moment of time and effort that we can dedicate to teaching Torah is extremely beneficial. Even if our contribution is very modest we have no idea what difference our efforts can make, for others but also for ourselves.

According to the halacha, even the destitute who rely on tzedaka must themselves fulfil the mitzvah of tzedaka.³ Similarly, even those who are not very learned and rely on others to teach them Torah can still help to teach others that are less learned than they are. As soon as we have learnt anything we are immediately in the position of being able to pass on that teaching to someone else. Hashem expects us to receive and to then pass on to others. If we make an effort, we will be able to find plenty of opportunities to teach Torah – to our children, to our friends, to our work colleagues. The fact that we are not official Torah scholars per se is irrelevant. Just like Reuven, we are each responsible for making our own contribution to the best of our abilities. And we are responsible for the spiritual welfare of our fellow Jews just as much as their financial and physical welfare. In caring about the spiritual welfare of others we are enhancing our own spiritual welfare in a beautiful cycle of giving.

Let's try something this week

1. Look for opportunities to help teach Torah to those around us. It can be as simple as sitting down with someone and offering to read through a passage together or sharing a Torah thought that you heard or read.
2. We need to take care to avoid preaching and to only teach those who are receptive. Being too forceful when the recipient is not interested can actually be counter-productive. Common sense, intuition and sensitivity are required.
3. Remember that often the 'giver' receives just as much as the 'receiver', both in this world and the next.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 248:1. If a person is destitute they do not need to give 10% but they should still give a small amount. An orthodox Rabbi should be consulted for the parameters.

About Darchai Noam

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 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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