

ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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A Giving Heart

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THERE IS AN OLD CHRISTIAN ADAGE that says, “There are three conversions a person needs to experience: the conversion of the head, the conversion of the heart and the conversion of the pocketbook.” Credited to Christian leaders in the 16th century, the comment seems to indicate that the relationship between believers and their financial resources has long been a complicated one, remaining so even today.

The Bible, however, makes it clear that that relationship is important to the Lord. A recent report on faith-based giving indicated that the Bible offers over 500 verses on prayer, fewer than 500 on faith and more than 2,000 verses relating to money. Further, the report says, 15% of everything Yeshua ever taught was on the topic of money and possessions, much of that relating to sharing them with others. Yet as believers, we often find this a difficult topic to address. Regardless of the abundance of biblical direction, giving remains a contentious issue, partly because those very verses have sometimes been misused by unscrupulous individuals for personal gain.

Add to that the ever-increasing global needs of those who live in poverty or are suffering because of war or natural disaster, and it is no wonder believers would rather talk about something else. Our mailboxes, and certainly our inboxes, are stuffed with letters and flyers filled with stories of hunger and disease, anguished children in war-torn countries and the slow destruction of the environment. Our local congregations need to be supported and often have additional projects and programs that require our provision. And our pastors are subject to the same onslaught of appeals for financial assistance. A clergy friend recently commented that he sometimes spends as much as 40% of his day dealing just with such requests.

The bulk of these petitions for funding are legitimate, expressing the critical needs of real people. But how do we decide where we should give? The issue is further complicated by the fact that giving in a biblical sense doesn't just refer to money. We can be asked for other types of possessions: our time, our expertise, our talents or sometimes just a willing pair of hands. Most of us have limited time and financial resources, and in the face of such overwhelming need, we can be left bewildered and discouraged. Perhaps the question we should be asking ourselves today is not how much or to whom we should give, but rather, what does it really mean to be a giver? As members of God's Kingdom on earth, what does a true "Kingdom giver" look like?

What Motivates Most Givers?

A website that specializes in all aspects of charitable giving recently published this list of reasons why the vast majority of people, including Christians, give to charity.

1. Someone I know asked me, and I wanted to help.
2. I felt emotionally moved by someone's story.
3. I want to feel I am not powerless in the face of overwhelming need, especially during a time of natural disaster.
4. I want to feel I am changing someone's life.
5. I feel a sense of closeness to a certain community or group and their cause.
6. I need a tax deduction.
7. I want to memorialize someone.
8. I was raised to give to charity—it is a tradition in my family.
9. I want to be "hip" and supporting a certain charity (i.e. wearing a yellow wrist band, etc) is in style.
10. It makes me feel connected to other people and builds my social network.
11. I want to have a good image for myself.
12. I want to leave a legacy that perpetuates me, my ideals or my cause.
13. I feel fortunate (or guilty) and want to give something back to others.
14. I want to be seen as a leader.
15. I give for religious reasons—God wants me to share my affluence.

Although this list covers a wide variety of reasons for making charitable donations, fourteen of the fifteen have something very important in common: the

“...when you give to the poor, do not
let your left hand know what your right
hand is doing, so that your giving will
be in secret...” Matthew 6:3-4



Photo by Ashernet

bottom line motivation is to benefit the giver. Only the very last reason on the list indicates a more selfless and biblically based stimulus for generosity. Yet the Bible is as clear in its admonishment of those who give for the wrong reasons as for those who stubbornly refuse to give at all.

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your father who is in heaven. So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:1–4 NASB).

Notice Yeshua says, “*when you give to the poor*,” not “*if you give to the poor*” (emphasis added). Clearly, it was His expectation that His followers would be people of generosity, sensitive to the needs of the less fortunate. But it is equally clear that He was concerned they would fall prey to the temptation to give for the wrong reasons. The act of giving was important, but the heart behind it made the difference in Kingdom terms. The same, of course, remains true today.

He was also encouraging those early believers to remember that giving had more than temporal implications. It was, in fact, worship. “Your father who is in heaven will see,” He reminded them. Yes, your money will give food to someone who is hungry or add to the church budget. But more importantly, God Himself will recognize your offering as a sacrifice to Him and blessing will result. The Apostle Paul takes this principle a step further in 2 Corinthians 9:6 when he says, “*But this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*”

Perhaps here we are beginning to get to the heart of what Kingdom giving is really all about as Paul alludes to reciprocity, or what some might sum up in the words, “what goes around comes around.” What you sow you will also reap could sound a bit self-serving, however, as though one should give for the sole purpose of receiving. Those early believers would have understood that this principle of reciprocity was inherently tempered by the moral maxim of altruism. They were intimately familiar with the teaching of Yeshua Himself, found in Luke 6:31 and Matthew 7:12, where they were encouraged to treat others as they would want to be treated.

“Therefore whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them for this is the Law (Torah) and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12).

“And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise” (Luke 6:31).

The same principle is a bedrock of Judaism, found throughout the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) and most clearly stated in Leviticus 19:18, “*You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself*” (emphasis added).

The Kingdom giver understands that God’s blessing is poured out in response to the act of giving performed with the right intention. He gives out of a true

moral commitment to the well-being of the other, loving as he would desire to be loved and cared for, without the expectation of anything in return.

Tzedakah—Giving as Righteousness

According to Judaism 101, *tzedakah* is the Hebrew word for the acts that we, in English, call charity or alms; giving aid, assistance and money to the poor and needy or to other worthy causes. To most of us, the word charity brings to mind benevolence and generosity, a magnanimous act by a person of means to someone less fortunate. However, the word *tzedakah* is derived from a Hebrew root which means righteousness, justice or fairness. Therefore in Judaism, giving to the poor is not seen as an act of generosity. It is rather an act of justice and righteousness. Each of us, as a human being, is responsible for the well-being of those around us. If God has blessed us with the means to do so, it is only just and right for us to give to those that are needy. Generosity has nothing to do with it; it is simply the right thing to do. If we are in fact made in the image of God, we are honor-bound to care for those less fortunate.

Charity is a fundamental part of the Jewish way of life. Traditional Jews give at least ten percent of their income to worthy causes, families collect coins for the poor and Jewish youth groups go door-to-door collecting for various causes that support the needy in the community. It is also very common for a mourner to make a donation to charity in the memory of the deceased. Charity is a means by which Jewish people express thanks to God, ask forgiveness from Him or request favor from Him. And it is so important that the recipient is considered the most important part of the equation. His reputation and integrity are carefully guarded and he is in no way looked upon as though he were of less importance than his benefactor. After all, were it not for those in need, the rest of the community would not be able to fulfill its obligation to give.

Throughout history, some in the Church have made an unfortunate comparison, proclaiming that Jews only give because they are required to whereas Christians, being much more generous, give because they want to. However, a true understanding of the concept of *tzedakah* proves this assessment to be false. Just as the Jewish giver is honor-bound to care for those around him, the Christian giver donates out of a moral commitment to the well-being of others. Both are living out that maxim found in Matthew 7:12 and Leviticus 19:18.

Beyond Tzedakah

The great 12th-century philosopher and *Torah* teacher, Moses Maimonides taught that one's giving should never stop with an obligatory ten percent. He taught that certain kinds of *tzedakah* are considered more meritorious than others, and he created a list that appears in the *Talmud* (rabbinic commentary). The lowest level, indicative of one who gives for the wrong reasons, is he who gives begrudgingly. This giver feels no real concern for those in need but gives out of a resentful sense of obligation. Next comes the giver who gives less than he knows he should, but he gives it cheerfully. This donor disregards God's

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also reap sparingly, and he who sows
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2 Corinthians 9:6



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Shay Wagner/ IDF Spokespersons Unit

instruction to care for others' needs and squanders a portion on his own happiness. Next is the man who only gives when asked. Judaism teaches that there is no shame in requesting assistance when it is needed, neither should a person feel too proud to take money when it is offered. It is considered a transgression to refuse *tzedakah* likening the suffering caused by such pride to the shedding of one's own blood. The Kingdom giver, however, doesn't wait to be asked.

The list continues on to the one who gives anonymously, putting into practice what Christians recognize in Paul's teaching. A Kingdom giver doesn't donate in order to receive accolades for his generosity and be admired by men. After all, His Father in heaven sees, and that's more than enough. And finally, we come to the giver who is generous enough to continue giving until he has enabled the recipient to become self-reliant. Ongoing care that lifts a man from poverty and sets him on the road to self-sufficiency not only helps the immediate beneficiary, it changes the course of history. Succeeding generations in the recipient's family will now have the opportunity to carry forth the legacy of the recipient's new-found success.

Chesed – Giving as Lovingkindness

Dwight Pryor, Hebraic roots teacher of blessed memory, taught that if one was to learn only a single Hebrew word in a lifetime, it should be the word *chesed*, so important is its meaning in understanding God's character. It is often translated mercy, grace or lovingkindness, but any definition is incomplete without the components of strength, steadfastness and generosity. It speaks of God's unfathomable, unconditional, extravagant and tender love for His people which is irrevocable and eternal. Used almost exclusively in relation to Israel, *chesed* is God's way of saying to His chosen people, "I cannot constrain Myself. I, by my very nature, am compelled to love you!" Like other Hebrew words, *chesed* does not refer only to a feeling or attitude, but also to action. Some have described it as the integration of caring concern and concrete deed.

In her book, *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus*, author Lois Tverberg describes *chesed*: "Hebrew has a word for life-long love that is richer and deeper than English has ever conceived of—*chesed*. Based in a covenantal relationship, *chesed* is a steadfast, rock-solid faithfulness that endures to eternity. (Isaiah 54:10) *Chesed* is a love that is so enduring that it persists beyond any sin or betrayal to mend brokenness and graciously extend forgiveness (Lamentations 3:31-32)."

Further, biblical scholar John Oswalt has this to say: "The word *chesed* is the descriptor par excellence of God in the [Tanakh]. The word speaks of a completely undeserved kindness and generosity done by a person who is in a position of power. This was the Israelites' experience of God....Unlike humans, this deity was not fickle, undependable, self-serving, and grasping. Instead, he was faithful, true, upright and generous—always."

In Exodus 33, Moses reveals his deep desire to know God more fully and completely, asking Him to "show me now your way that I may know you..." (v. 13). The

Lord relents, and in Exodus 34:6, as His glory passes by Moses, He proclaims the name of the Lord. In that ancient world, a name was more than just a moniker for identification. It revealed the very soul and spirit of the one named. So in Exodus 34:6, God reveals to mankind His character, His substance, His very essence and one of the words He uses is *chesed*. By His nature, God is a giver, lavishing life, love and all good things on His creation. “Every good and perfect gift is from above” (1:17), the Apostle James tells us, coming to us from our Father in heaven. Psalm 33:5 reveals that God loves *zedakah* and His *chesed* fills the entire earth.

Giving the *Torah* Way

The Jewish sage R. Simlai notes that the *Torah* begins with acts of *chesed*, the giving of life and the clothing of Adam and Eve, and ends with an act of *chesed*, the burying of Moses. *Torah* reveals God as one who cares deeply about His creations and acts constantly with generosity and kindness towards them. However, that generosity and compassion, or *chesed*, is not only impetus to worship God, it is an essence that is to be emulated. The *Midrash* tells the following story:


When Moses instructed Israel, “Walk after the Lord your God, walk in His ways,” they said to him, “Who could walk in God’s ways? Does it not say, ‘God travels in whirlwind and storm, and clouds are the dust on God’s feet?’” (Nahum 1:3). And Moses said to Israel, “God’s ways are graciousness and truth and acts of loving kindness.”

The *Midrash* continues with the beautiful statement that the beginning of *Torah* is *chesed*, as is the middle and the end. The very essence of *Torah* is a God whose essence is *chesed* and who calls His children to that same essence.

When Moses instructed the Israelites to walk in God’s ways, the sages say, He was telling them to live a life of *chesed*, of compassion and lovingkindness. As the children of the most high God, we are instructed to cultivate those character traits, engaging in concrete acts of kindness.

Finally, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler taught that to be created in the image of God is to have the capacity, like God, to be compassionate and to give generously. We are constantly pulled, he wrote, between the impulse to give and the urge to take, between stubborn selfishness and deep kindness. Being created in God’s image implies that we truly can become givers, or more specifically that we are intended from creation to be givers. A life of *Torah*, walking in God’s ways and cleaving to him, Dressler says, brings us ever closer to what we were intended to be: creatures who manifest love, kindness and generosity to others. In other words, we were created to be Kingdom givers in order that we will constantly reflect the character and nature of God.

And Yeshua reveals to us what some of those acts of *chesed* should look like. We are to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, take in the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit those who are in prison. In Matthew 25:45, He makes it clear that these actions are specifically to be directed to those of His natural family. We are to live lives of compassion and kindness, remembering to extend *chesed* to all men, but most certainly, Yeshua tells us, to the Jewish people.



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Kingdom Givers

The sages also tell the story of the man who goes to bed and as he drifts off to sleep, he thinks, “Tomorrow I will get up and do a favor for so-and-so. Tomorrow I will give to help so-and-so...” This man, they say, is destined to rejoice with the righteous in *Gan Eden*. How can a thought destine a man for heaven, you might ask. The sages reply with another question. What kind of person is it that has such thoughts in the privacy of his bedroom at the end of a long, hard day? Only someone who really cares deep down about others; someone whose caring is an essential part of his being, someone whose very essence is *chesed*, a Kingdom giver.

The same story asks another question. If this man had a large sum of money to give, should he give it all to help one individual, or would it be preferable to break it down into smaller amounts, giving equal amounts to separate individuals? The answer, Jewish tradition says, is that it is better to give many small sums, because by doing so, one habituates himself to giving. The ideal of this kind of giving is that it is not sufficient to perform acts of kindness; one must strive to become a person whose essence is kindness, a Kingdom giver.

We live in a world filled with ever-increasing needs and have the promise from Yeshua that the poor will always be with us. We will continue on a daily basis to face those inboxes filled with requests for help and assistance. But let’s not view them with chagrin, rather remember that our Father, in whose image we were created, is a generous, lavish giver and He depends on us to reflect His character to the world through our own actions. What a privilege it is to be a giver, to step into His calling on all of our lives to join with Him in caring for those around us, but especially those He calls the apple of His eye. And nothing gives Him greater pleasure than to see His children cleaving to Him, walking in His ways, and joyfully living lives of compassion and generosity.

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Scripture is taken from the New King James, unless otherwise noted.



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