

Rabbi's Teaching

Purim and Tzedaka

Giving *Tzedaka*, charity, is a pre-eminent commandment. The Talmud called it "equal in importance to all the other commandments combined" (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra, 9a). Maimonides taught that one should be more diligent in the observance of *Tzedaka* than in any other positive commandment ("Hilchot Matanot L'Evyonim" -- Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 10:1).

The Rabbis also developed a schedule of appropriate times to give charity. These included certain breaks in weekday public prayers, when someone's fortunes were declining but before he or she "hit bottom," when celebrating a joyous milestone, and, not least, before holidays.

Purim became especially connected with *Tzedaka*, for a number of reasons. First of all, the story of Purim teaches that all of us are vulnerable to misfortune. Esther, like many Jews in the Persian Empire, was apparently an assimilated, comfortable resident. She had little contact with her heritage, used a Persian name, and intermarried. Still, she showed remarkable courage and loyalty when she appeared unsummoned before the King to try to save other lives.

Remarkably, in the 4th Century BCE, when the Jewish calendar was set, the Rabbis arranged it so that the holiday of Purim would never fall on Shabbat. Why? "Rabbi Joseph said: 'Mipnei Sh'ei'nei'Ha'ani'yim Nos'ot b'mikra M'gillah: The eyes of the poor look forward to the reading of the Megillah.'" Why? They know that charity was dispensed abundantly on Purim. Why, however, don't we just read the Megillah on Shabbat and wait until Sunday to dispense charity? "Govim bo bayom um'chalkim bo bayom: You collect it on the day, and you distribute it on the day." (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 4b)

It is extremely easy and tempting to put off the Mitzvah of *Tzedakah*. We all have very legitimate needs of our own, and we all face daunting challenges of priorities in charitable giving. This natural, understandable complexity, though, can lead too easily to rationalization and delay. Surely, the questions we face are not nearly as severe as those faced by Esther, who risked her own life when she appeared uninvited before the King to plead for her people.

Simchat Purim, the joy of Purim, involves overturning, with religious sanction, many of the manners and pieties which normally constrain us. Rabbis are fair game for ridicule; cantors lead services with clowning and parody; and screaming and boisterousness replace concentration as the Synagogue norm. Similarly, Purim is a day to spend lavishly on strangers -- through giving money and food to the needy and *Tzedaka* to responsible organizations -- and to skimp a little on oneself:

"It is better for people to spend more on gifts to the poor for Purim than to spend more for their own Purim meal, or for sending gifts (mishlo'ach manot) to their friends, for no joy is more splendid than bringing happiness to the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the strangers. He who gladdens the heart of these unfortunate people resembles the Sh'china/Divine Presence." (Maimonides: Hilchot M'gillah v'; Chanukah, Laws of Megillah and Chanukah, 2:17)

Simchat Purim
Happy Purim!

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