

# On the Classification of Tzedakah

Reconciling Insights from Science, Philosophy, and the Sages

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*These shoes have walked some strange streets  
Stranger still to come  
Sometimes the prayers of strangers  
Are all that keeps them from  
Trying to stay static  
Something even death can't do  
Everything is motion  
To the motion be true*

*In this cold commodity culture  
Where you lay your money down  
It's hard to even notice  
That all this earth is hallowed ground  
Harder still to feel it  
Basic as a breath  
Love is stronger than darkness  
Love is stronger than death*

*Hackles rise in anger  
Heat waves rise in sex  
The gift moves on regardless  
Tying this world to the next  
May you never tire of waiting  
Never feel that life is cheap  
May your life be filled with light  
Except for when you're trying to sleep*

*The gift  
Keeps moving  
Never know  
Where it's going to land  
You must stand  
Back and let it  
Keep on changing hands*

**- "The Gift", Bruce Cockburn**

While the details of the *Sheva Mitzvot B'nei Noach* are now well-known thanks to the dedication of rabbis and Torah scholars, there remain some curiosities, quirks, and mysteries regarding Noahide *halacha*. One of these quandaries is the classification of *tzedakah*, a commandment for charity that is, for the moment, set outside of the *Sheva Mitzvot* and framed as a logical obligation.

Although this non-classification of *tzedakah* does not create any *halachic* issues for Noahides, there remains a question about why, specifically, charitable giving is a logical activity. Indeed, while many modern societies praise acts of charity and recognize their importance in society, such things are not seen as an obligation. Furthermore, powerful and influential philosophies such as Objectivism frame altruistic mentalities as dangerous, parasitic, and self-destructive, indicating that engaging with the topic of charity does not necessarily lead to a logical acceptance of *tzedakah* as an obligation.

The mystery surrounding *tzedakah's* classification, as well as its profound importance within Noahide practice, deserves a deeper investigation. Indeed, given that charity often involves money or other material items, one could argue that a failure to give sufficient *tzedakah* could constitute some form of theft given the monetary nature of the infraction. On the other hand, the word for *tzedakah* is derived from *tzedek*, which means “righteousness” – this suggests that charity may fit better under the commandment of justice.

While it would be inappropriate for a goyish Torah scholar to advocate for either position, a comprehensive review of the secular literature reveals some implications for the concept of *tzedakah* that may prove to be useful to *poskim* seeking to refine Noahide *halacha* in the future. Indeed, the human understanding of natural and social processes has improved to the point where charity can be related to the laws of physics, and in turn related to the health of societies. When placed within context of Torah law, these details provide a degree of illumination regarding the logic and aesthetic behind *tzedakah* and provide the forms of arguments for the inclusion of charity under either of these pre-existing categories.

## ARE NOAHIDES OBLIGATED TO GIVE TZEDAKAH?

Much like the obligation to honor one's parents, the sages frame *tzedakah* as an obligation that can be reached logically by any human being. However, this is not a universal opinion – in the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides' position seems to be that charity is not an obligation for non-Jews, although obviously preferable to stinginess<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, the sages and prophets teach that Sodom was annihilated because they refused to engage in charity, implying that this was something humans were expected to do in the post-Flood eras<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the sages teach that *tzedakah* is equal to all the other commandments combined, indicating that this unclassified commandment is of supreme importance<sup>3</sup>.

But why, exactly? As previously mentioned, it is not necessarily logical for a single parent of two children to be liberal with handouts to homeless people. Similarly, it is not clear why government aid programs to poorer countries are a good use of taxpayer money, or why Judaism stakes a claim on ten percent of someone's income<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, within the context of Noahide *halacha*, the obligation to give charity may seem somewhat arbitrary, given that it does not clearly fit into any one of the *Sheva Mitzvot*.

## TZEDAKAH IN NATURE

The logic behind *tzedakah* in human situations is often quite complicated and involves unspoken vested interests in conflict with each other. However, in nature, collaborative activity within and between species

has long been an interest of biologists, who have discovered cases of shrimp and fish exploring unknown territory together<sup>5</sup>, ospreckers feeding on parasites that irritate other animals<sup>6</sup>, and deep relationships between many species of animals and plants.

In some ways, the shark could be seen as giving *tzedakah* to the remora, which cleans the scraps from its teeth in exchange for scraps of food<sup>7</sup>. This would suggest that these types of charitable relationships are in fact the law of nature, a conclusion starkly different from the Darwinian competition currently being lived out by the Western world.

## TZEDAKAH IN PHYSICS

Interestingly, the concept of *tzedakah* can also be found woven into the laws of physics, primarily through the second law of thermodynamics. Indeed, when abstracted out into the essential mathematics, our universe's spontaneous tendency towards disorder can be understood as an equalization<sup>8</sup> or a flow down a gradient, from more concentrated to less concentrated.

This is why, for example, a drop of ink in a glass will diffuse into the entire body of liquid. It is why things break down, why our cups of coffee get cold. Therefore, it can also be inferred from this spontaneous flow from "more concentrated" to "less concentrated", there should also be a flow of wealth from those who have much to those who have little.

A question naturally arises as to why this is not the case – not in modern-day society, not in Objectivism, and not even in the many failed attempts at communism. The answer, of course, is the *Yetzer Hara*, the evil inclination that tempts humans towards greed. This type of force is *neg-entropic*, or resists entropy, and interestingly life forms are the only things that display neg-entropic behavior, albeit only throughout their lifetimes. This, as many theists have noted, is one line of evidence for intelligent design<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, greedy people resist the natural forces present in the universe, essentially becoming "blockage points" in the distribution of wealth managed by the Creator. Instead of partnering with the Creator in this fundamental universal law, they keep things to themselves and create unnecessary imbalances in Creation.

## TZEDAKAH AND SOCIAL ENTROPY

These imbalances in Creation, felt to most humans as *injustices* of some kind, can be found in economic theory as *Gini's Coefficient*. This ratio, a measure of the relative wealth inequality of any population, has been found to correlate with the level of social unrest in that society. Thus, as the Western middle class has been devastated, the reverberations of job losses and economic disruptions can be seen in homelessness, poverty, food bank use, and other phenomena.

However, as demonstrated in *Ticket to Heaven*<sup>10</sup>, once these entropies are allowed to propagate within a social system, the corrections to these problems create problems of their own. Homelessness in many Western cities has been a persistent and worsening problem throughout the past decade, with home thefts, carjackings, tent takeovers of parks, and other signs of social decay creating additional problems for homeowners, cities, and insurance companies. Many North American stores have begun closing locations in troubled cities, citing broken windows, drug usage in bathrooms, and violence towards staff as existential threats to their ability to do business safely.

The solution, of course, is participation in the mitzvah of *tzedakah*, which allows wealth to flow properly between rich and poor. Even the leaders of chimpanzee troupes, a species considered by biologists to be analogous to humans in many ways, often side with the underdog in food disputes, also serving as peacekeepers and consolers while ensuring sustainable wealth distribution<sup>11</sup>.

Interestingly, a rather controversial philosophy paper written decades ago examined the issue of whether ordinary humans in Western societies could be considered evil. The conclusion, largely founded on the issue of *opportunity costs* between Western luxury spending and society-stabilizing philanthropy, indicates that some level of proactive charity is both good for society and morally obligatory, even in capitalistic societies where people are legally free to spend their money as they like<sup>12</sup>.

## APPLICATIONS TO NOAHIDE THOUGHT

These discoveries within the physical and social sciences have some very interesting and potentially useful applications for Noahides. From these insights alone, it is possible to classify failures to provide *tzedakah* as not only violations of the prohibitions against theft and the mandate to preserve justice, but also the prohibition against idolatry – and, as we shall see, potentially a rather severe one.

### Argument for Theft

While some might consider it a bit of a stretch, one could argue that if the Creator intended a certain homeless person to receive that crumpled five-dollar bill in your pocket, keeping that bill in your pocket is stealing from the homeless person. However, the existing *halacha* for theft seems to indicate that theft and robbery are the taking of something from someone else's possession. Thus, the position for *tzedakah* as a violation of the prohibition against theft may fail on this basis.

### Argument for Justice

The position that *tzedakah* falls under the mandate of justice is significantly stronger, particularly given that the Hebrew word is derived from *tzedek*, also the root of *tzaddik*. However, some Noahide *poskim* may take the position that the mitzvah of justice specifically applies to the formation and maintenance of *halachic* courts and the enforcement of the *Sheva Mitzvot* within society. Thus, while the practice of *tzedakah* has a strong connection to the concept of justice, a position could also be taken that it is not within the purview of courts and laws.

### Argument for Idolatry

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, thinking that one must hold on to their current possessions could be considered idolatry. Is it not true that the Creator meticulously plans and manages every aspect of the universe? Is it not true that one's financial situation is entirely within the hands of the Creator and no other person, being, or power? Therefore, would it not be logical that failing to give enough *tzedakah*, even when suffering from poverty, constitutes a lack of faith in the Creator's ability or will to provide?

Even worse, it might be the case that some wicked people consider themselves to be entirely self-made, and may even resent the less fortunate for having needs that they cannot fulfill themselves. One might ask whether such people, depending on the level of their delusional self-sufficiency, see themselves as the power that puts food on the table. Thus, *tzedakah* may have a fit within the prohibition against idolatry.

## Conclusion

While these thoughts are, of course, informal, the kaleidoscope of transgressions that could reasonably be connected to stinginess reaffirm the sages' emphasis on *tzedakah* and indicate that diligent practice of this *mitzvah* is of great importance to the Creator.

### AFTERNOTE: TZEDAKAH AS AN INVESTMENT

As taught by R. Yosef Mizrahi in many of his lectures, all *tzedakah* may not be good in the eyes of the Creator. Consider, for example, people who donate to the Hamas terrorists, or people who give drug money to an addict to help them get their fix. This money can be materially tied to bad outcomes, and as R. Mizrahi phrases it, are like an investment in evil.

On the other hand, investments in Torah scholarship are very high-value, as sponsoring this kind of learning creates thousands of *mitzvot* per hour according to the sages' calculations. Similarly, investments in genuinely life-saving causes can, in the words of the sages, save entire worlds. These investments can be reasonably expected to pay dividends in Olam Haba, as the fruits of one's money will have contributed to the development of wisdom and the maintenance of what justice this world currently has.

Kiruv is another high-value investment, as creating *Baali Teshuvah* and *B'nei Noach* is soul-saving and has cascade effects in the world through more Torah study, more righteous living, and more *mitzvot*. This author has used the sages' calculations to estimate the rough merit-value of various marketing channels, provided the content of the advertisements could be sufficiently considered a form of Torah study:

OUTREACH CHANNEL	MERITS-PER-DOLLAR	NOTES
YOUTUBE ADS	330 MPD	40 ad views per dollar @ 30s
FLYERS (ME OR VOLUNTEER)	25 MPD	Est. 10s reading flyer on avg
MOVIE THEATRE (LARGE)	3.5 MPD	Est. 30 viewers/show @ 30s each
MOVIE THEATRE (INDIE)	???	Specific show buys possible
FLYERS (PAID DISABLED PERSON)	10 MPD + High Level <i>Tzedakah</i>	10s reading, employing disabled

## REFERENCES

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- <sup>1</sup> Mishneh Torah, Law of Kings 10:10 – Discussed by Lubavitcher Rebbe (asknoah.org)
- <sup>2</sup> Ezekiel 16:49
- <sup>3</sup> Bava Bathra 9b
- <sup>4</sup> Silberberg, N., “Charity During Times of Economic Difficulty”, Chabad.org
- <sup>5</sup> Fearnley, K., “Weird & Wonderful Creatures: Randall's Pistol Shrimp”, AAAS (2017)
- <sup>6</sup> Herzl, R., “Oxpeckers: The Rhino’s Guard”, Rhino Recovery Fund (2021)
- <sup>7</sup> Stokes, D., “The Remoras And Sharks Relationship Explained”, Dutch Shark Society (2022)
- <sup>8</sup> Shannon, C.E., Weaver, W., “The Mathematical Theory of Communication”, The University of Illinois Press (1964)
- <sup>9</sup> Strong, Z.R.J., “To Infinity and Beyond: Towards a Full-System Physics” (2023)
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- <sup>11</sup> De Waal, F., “The Surprising Science of Alpha Males”, TED (2018)
- <sup>12</sup> Singer, P., “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”, Philosophy & Public Affairs (1972)