

MY TZEDAKAH PLAN

Tzedakah Learning Pod Session 6 – May/June 2011

OPENING – PLEASE READ ALOUD

In this sixth Tzedakah Learning Pod session, we're going to apply the learning that we've done in the last five sessions and formulate a tzedakah plan to guide our giving for the coming year. After a couple of introductory texts, this session will be more "tachlis" or practical. We'll share our initial tzedakah plans that we worked on for homework and use this space and time to discuss questions that arose when we were working on our plans. At the end of the session we'll write down the next steps that we will take in order to implement our tzedakah plans.

This session is divided into 4 sections, and at the start of each section, there is a recommended amount of time. If we hold to these recommendations, the session will take 1.5 hours. Do we want to assign one person to help us keep the time?

Let's get started!

SECTION 1 – BEING CAREFUL ABOUT OUR TZEDAKAH – 20 MINUTES

Please read aloud:

Sheryl Sandberg, "The Charity Gap," *Wall Street Journal*, 4 April 2007.¹

But there is a surprising disconnect between Americans' philanthropic aspirations and their charitable giving. The vast majority of givers believe the bulk of their donations help those less fortunate than themselves. In fact, less than one-third of the money individuals gave to nonprofits in 2005 went to help the economically disadvantaged, according to a new study commissioned by Google.org, the philanthropic arm of Google. Of the \$250 billion in donations, less than \$78 billion explicitly targeted those in need.

. . . While more research is necessary to understand this charity gap, several explanations seem likely. First, it is certainly easier to give -- and harder to say no -- to those in your own community or among your circle of friends. Neighbors deliver invitations to school auctions; classmates call for university capital campaigns. The homeless shelter in the inner city offers neither the peer pressure of a familiar face nor the opportunity for one's friends to see one's generosity. Giving to organizations close to home also offers more comfort that funds will be used effectively.

. . . Of course, philanthropic giving not targeted to the disadvantaged nevertheless supports important causes -- education, health, the arts -- and valuable public goods. Such programs benefit everyone, rich and poor, though to substantially differing degrees. But because they are broad-based, such efforts are far from the most effective method of addressing critical issues for those most in need.

. . . As Americans consider their 1040s this year, they need to ask if there is a disconnect between

¹ <http://quidnimis.squarespace.com/the-charity-gap/>

their desires and their actions. Many will find, perhaps to their surprise, that what they want to do is not, in deed, what they're doing. If so, they should start looking deeper into how their donations benefit those whose economic fortunes are dramatically different from their own.

Please discuss:

- Sandberg is specifically addressing the issue of why more of our giving is not directed towards those who are economically disadvantaged. Do you agree with her reasoning? Does it match your own experience?
- Think back to our first homework assignment where we looked at the categories of our “top money” giving and reflect on our discussions over the last six months. Have you found there to be a disconnect between your aspirations and your actual giving? (This could be about where, how much, when/how often you give, etc.) If so, what kind of disconnect? What might be some reasons for the disconnect? What would you need to do to close the gap between your desires and your actions?

Please read aloud:

<p>Rambam, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10:1</p> <p>We are obligated to be more careful in fulfilling the commandment of tzedakah than any other commandment, because tzedakah is the sign of the righteous person (tzaddik), the seed of Abraham, our father, as it is said: “I [God] have known him [Abraham] so that he will command his children after him to do tzedakah.” (Genesis 18:19)</p> <p>[Translation by Rabbi Eliyahu Touger]</p>	<p>רמב"ם הלכות מתנות עניים י:א</p> <p>חייבין אנו להזהר במצות צדקה יותר מכל מצות עשה, שהצדקה סימן לצדיק זרע אברהם אבינו שנאמר כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את בניו לעשות צדקה.</p>
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In other words, Abraham was instructed to teach his descendants to act righteously (in Hebrew, to do *tzedakah*). Tzedakah is therefore how we demonstrate that we are the descendants of the righteous Abraham and are, ourselves, righteous. Rambam uses this text to conclude that we should be particularly scrupulous in our observance of the commandment of tzedakah, since the way in which we observe that commandment is a reflection of how righteous we are.

Please discuss:

1. Why do you think Rambam emphasizes the importance of being careful with fulfilling the commandment of tzedakah?
2. The prooftext from Genesis is part of God's calculation about whether or not to share with Abraham God's plans to destroy S'dom and Amorrhah. And, indeed, God concludes that because Abraham's role is to act righteously and be a model of righteousness, God cannot hide God's plans from Abraham. What does this context add to your understanding of tzedakah?
3. The Rambam considers Abraham to be a tzedakah role model. Who is your tzedakah role model (someone biblical, historical or contemporary, Jewish or not)? Why?
4. How has that person influenced your tzedakah practice in the past? How might that person influence your giving now or in the future? In particular would you make any changes to the plan you drafted for homework based on your tzedakah role model?

SECTION 2 – REFINING OUR TZEDAKAH PLANS – 45 MINUTES

Please read aloud:

Before we begin talking about our individual tzedakah plans, it might be helpful to remember our conversation from Pod Session 1 about how we would create safe space. As we discussed then, although money is hard to talk about, we hope that each of us will be able to set aside the fears and inhibitions we may have, in order to talk openly and honestly. Through this openness and honesty, the potential can emerge for deep and meaningful conversations – and the potential for each of us to be personally transformed as a result.

Let's take just a few minutes to remember the ground rules that we agreed to in Session 1:

- I will use active, open, empathetic listening without negative judgment
- If jealousy arises in me, I'll notice it and set it aside, in order to be the most helpful I can to my fellow pod members
- I will take personal responsibility to encourage pod members who speak less often to speak more often, and be self aware of the need to *tzimtzum* myself (quiet oneself, make oneself smaller) where appropriate.
- I will speak with positive intent and assume that others are doing the same.
- *For those who are meeting via phone:* I will say my name at the start of each of my comments.
- *For those who are meeting via phone:* Since our conference call doesn't allow for non-verbal cues, I will make an extra effort to ask for clarification when I need it and to ensure that we're all engaged and contributing. I will set aside other activities to give my full focus to our conversation.
- What is said here, stays here – and let's take a minute to remind ourselves of how we defined this for our group...
- Any other ground rules that our group added

For homework, you spoke with friends/family about tzedakah and began to draft an initial plan for your tzedakah-giving for this coming year. Hopefully, by having these conversations and creating this plan, in conjunction with the learning we've been doing together, you are addressing some of the gaps between your intentions and your actions, as well as heeding the Rambam's call to be more careful or deliberate in your tzedakah-giving.

Presumably, some questions arose for you while talking with your friends/family and while drafting your initial plan - and/or there are parts of your plan that are incomplete. The purpose of the next 45 minutes is to "workshop" our plans by sharing with one another parts of our plans with which we're struggling and helping each other make some difficult decisions and/or solve some problems that are preventing us from moving forward. You can structure this section in whatever way is most productive for your group, but here are a few suggestions:

- a. Each person in your pod gets 10-15 minutes to raise questions/challenges in their plan, and questions that came up in tzedakah conversations, and have the group discuss these questions/challenges.
- b. Everyone in the group suggests 2-3 "big questions" about tzedakah-giving and the group decides on a few of these questions to discuss. You can include your own

answers, as well as insights gained from your tzedakah conversations with friends/family.

- c. Use the questions from the homework (which are copied below) as a guide and go around and have each person in the group answer them, including insights gained from tzedakah conversations with friends/family. (You can either go question by question or have 1 person answer all the questions and then move to the next person and so on.) If people are struggling with making decisions about any of the questions, you can pause and discuss.
 - i. Homework questions:
 1. How much money do you plan to give away? How did you arrive at this number?
 2. Where will you give your tzedakah? You can respond with issue areas (hunger, education, environment, etc.), populations (poor people in my city, Jews around the world, etc.), specific organizations, or some combination. Why did you choose these issues / populations / organizations?
 3. What will be your method for giving tzedakah? Will you donate weekly, monthly, when you're asked, all at one specific time during the year? Why? Will you ritualize the act of giving? If so, how?
 4. How much time do you plan to donate as a volunteer? How did you arrive at this number?
 5. What effect do you hope your tzedakah/volunteering will have in the world?
 6. What effect do you hope your tzedakah/volunteering will have on yourself?
- d. Keep time so that each person has enough time to share and get feedback on his/her plan.

SECTION 3 – NEXT STEPS – 10 MINUTES

Please read aloud:

Hopefully that discussion was productive and helped you resolve some of the questions you had about your initial tzedakah plan. Now it's time to think about operationalizing your plan. Please take the next 5 minutes to write a "to do" list of tasks you need to accomplish in order to put your plan into action. Some examples of tasks include:

1. Put a reminder in my calendar on the 1st of every month to give tzedakah.
2. Share my plan with my partner and make sure that we agree.
3. Find an organization that addresses an issue I've identified as a priority for my giving.
4. Calculate the amount of tzedakah I would like to give this year.

If you're one of those people (like many on the Learning Committee) who needs a deadline in order to actually complete anything, please also add deadlines to each item in your "to do" list.

Please share your Tzedakah "To Do" List with your Pod-mates.

SECTION 4 – ACTION, REFLECTION, MOVING FORWARD, AND CLOSING – 15 MINUTES

In this section, we will reflect on our learning and next steps from the whole Pod series. If your group is willing and someone is able to write/type people's reflections in sections A and B (not attributed to a person, of course) and send them to the Learning Committee, we'd be grateful. It will help with our planning for next year.

A. Study and Action

Please read aloud:

<p>Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 40b</p> <p>Rabbi Tarfon and some elders were reclining in an upper chamber in the house of Nitza in Lod when this question came up: Which is greater, study or action? Rabbi Tarfon spoke up and said: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva spoke up and said: Study is greater. The others then spoke up and said: Study is greater because it leads to action. [Soncino translation]</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי, קדושין מ:</p> <p>וכבר היה רבי טרפון וזקנים מסובין בעלית בית נתזה בלוד, נשאלה שאילה זו בפניהם: תלמוד גדול או מעשה גדול? נענה רבי טרפון ואמר: מעשה גדול, נענה ר"ע ואמר: תלמוד גדול, נענו כולם ואמרו: תלמוד גדול, שהתלמוד מביא לידי מעשה.</p>
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Please discuss:

1. We have spent a lot of time in our pods studying and discussing tzedakah. What has been the value for each of us of these discussions?
2. The conclusion of Kiddushin 40b is that study leads to action. Is this true for each of us from this Pod series? Are there things we are doing or will do differently as a result of our conversations? If so, what are a few of them?

B. Reflection

Please discuss:

1. Besides any different actions we may take, what have been some personal highlights or challenges of our discussions?
2. What has been our experience of discussing tzedakah over these past six months? Are there ways in which we have each been personally/spiritually affected? How so?

C. Moving Forward

Please read aloud:

We've gone through a whole tzedakah learning process over the past six months, reflecting on our tzedakah associations, motivations, intentions, and desires. There are definitely advantages to continuing this dialogue – and continuing to hold each other accountable.

Do folks want to set a date in July or August to meet again? We can share our Tzedakah “To Do” Lists, see how we've been doing, and help support each other as we each work to make our own tzedakah more intentional.

From the HEKDESH Learning Committee, a preview - we intend to have a Year 2 curriculum for the Tzedakah Learning Pods, and several Pod members have expressed interest in participating. Please take a minute to discuss whether you would like to continue and whether you would like to continue in this Pod or in a new configuration. Please assign one Pod member to email the Learning Committee with your conclusions about continuing next year.

D. Closing

Please read aloud:

Mazal tov!! You have now completed the Tzedakah Learning Pod series! Thank you very much for being part of this journey. We (the Learning Committee) are excited that you continued throughout and have been pleased and grateful to hear some of your feedback along the way.

In a few weeks, we'll be sending out an End of Series Evaluation Survey. PLEASE, please take a few minutes to complete the survey. Especially as this is our pilot year, it's very important that we have your feedback as we plan for next year. We very much thank you in advance!!!

And don't forget your last piece of Tzedakah Learning Pod homework – review the next steps that you've outlined and implement your tzedakah plan!