



TSEDARAH -
a Family Affair

TZEDAKAH: A FAMILY AFFAIR

FOCUS ON HUNGER

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with

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For most of us, "hunger" is the slight twinge we feel in our stomachs when we have an unusually long wait between lunch and dinner. Yet, amazing as it seems, according to the government agencies that study these things, every single day 110,000 people die because of hunger somewhere in the world.

Just seeing the words written down makes us realize what an enormous problem hunger is to our world. But before you throw up your hands and say "This problem is too big for me, after all what can I do to make any difference," read on, and you'll discover there really are lots of things you and your family (and friends) can do.

When it comes to hunger in the world, there is both cause for concern and hope. More people have died as a result of hunger in the last 50 years than in all the wars and revolutions of the past 150 years. Still, in this century so far, over 50 countries have eliminated hunger as a basic life issue for their people, and we currently have the ability to produce enough food to feed twice the current population of the world!

So why would you be concerned about hunger in the first place? There is a wonderful *midrash* (that's a story that rabbis tell in order to make a point) about two men rowing in a boat on a lake. All of a sudden, one man takes out a drill and begins to drill a hole in the bottom of the boat. The second man starts yelling "Are you crazy? What are you doing? We'll sink and drown!" To which the first man replies, "What are you getting so excited about. After all, I'm only drilling under my seat!"

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The whole earth is like that boat in the story, floating through the universe. Judaism teaches us that we can't close our eyes to the sufferings of others. To be a good person, a responsible Jew, demands that we do whatever we can to make the world a better place for everyone, including insuring that people have enough food to eat.

What Does Judaism Say About Hunger?

At the beginning of the Pesah seder, there is a special paragraph that has been read for hundreds of years. Take out your family Haggadah, and you will see this special passage. It says, "Let all who are hungry, come and eat with us," and is there to remind us that it is our job to help relieve the hunger in the world.

IN THE BIBLE

The issue of hunger is discussed frequently in the bible, with a strong emphasis on community responsibility toward feeding the hungry.

Leviticus Chapter 23 teaches farmers to leave the corners of our fields for the poor and says if you are hungry you can take fruit from an orchard or corn from a field to satisfy your hunger. (You don't take it with you--that would be stealing--but providing food to reduce your immediate hunger is part of the responsibility of the farmer who grows the crops.)

It also says (Leviticus 24:19) "When you reap the harvest of your field and you forget a sheaf in the field, don't go back to get it. Leave it for the poor and the orphan." Deuteronomy 15:11 teaches, "Open your hand to your brother, to your needy, to your poor in the land."

The prophet Isaiah teaches that God wants us to "share your bread with the hungry," and bring the poor that are cast out into your home" (Isaiah 58).

Doing justice is one of the major commandments of Jewish tradition. Our prophets taught, "It has been told you what is good and what God requires of you, to do justly to love mercy and walk humbly with your God" (Micha 6:8), and "Let justice well up as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24).

For Judaism, feeding the hungry is an expression of justice, which is actually what the root of the word Tzedakah means. Tzedakah isn't giving charity; it is simply doing the just thing, that which is right.

INTALMUD & MIDRASH

The rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash took the idea of Tzedakah very seriously. They created many rules and stories in order to impress upon us how important it is for us to act to help those in need.

- Rabbi Ossi said, "Tzedakah is equal in importance to all the other mitzvo' put together" (Talmud Baba Batra 9a).
- "Even a poor person who receives Tzedakah must give from what he receives to help others" (Talmud Gitin 7b).
- "Rabbi Pinhas in the name of Rabbi Reuben said, "Whoever gives a coin to a poor person, God will reward with long life. For he isn't only giving a coin, he is giving life itself" (Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 34:2).
- "When Rabbi Huna would eat a meal, he would open his door and say, "Whoever is in need, let that person come and eat" (Talmud T'ani 206).
- "Our Rabbis taught, give sustenance to the poor of the non-Jews along with the poor of Israel. Visit the sick of the non-Jews along with the sick of Israel. Do these things in order to bring peace into the world" (Talmud Gitin 61a).
- "Rabbi Tanhum, though he needed only one portion of meat for himself, would buy two; one bunch of vegetables, (he would buy two) one for himself and one for the poor" (Kohlelet Rabba 7:30).
- "The world is sustained by these three things - Torah, worship and acts of loving kindness toward others" (Talmud Avot).
- "He who saves one life is counted as if he had saved the entire world" (Talmud Sanhedrin).

SO WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

Now that you have seen how important doing acts of justice toward others is in Jewish tradition, here are some ways you can fulfill your responsibility to do Tzedakah using your new Tzedakah Box.

SHABBAT

1. Place your Tzedakah box on the dining table, and each Friday night before the candle blessing, put coins into the box. You might encourage your entire family to get into the Shabbat "Tzedakah habit," either by contributing to your Tzedakah box or one of their own.
2. Each week for a month watch the newspaper and your mailbox. If you pay attention, you will find a large number of organizations, institutions, individuals and causes that appear to be worth supporting. At the end of each month, have a family "Tzedakah meeting" to go over the possible recipient list you have created that month and vote on where your Tzedakah contributions will go.
3. If you have only one Tzedakah box in the family, pass it to a different family member each month. That person is responsible for the contributions to the box that month, and then gets to decide where the money will go.
4. Each Shabbat evening at the start of the meal, after contributing to the Tzedakah box and lighting the candles, go around the family and have everyone share one thing that happened to them during the past week for which they are grateful. Sharing these "joys" of the week allows your family to remember that since you have blessings in your lives, it is important to share blessings with others through the act of Tzedakah. When you then bless the wine with the *kiddush*, you are symbolically blessing all the collective joys of the family.

5. One way to help fill your Tzedakah box faster is to make a deal with your parents whereby you will do extra chores around the house in exchange for "payment" made by them directly into your Tzedakah box.

ROSH HASHANAYOM KIPPUR

1. Before lighting candles on Erev Rosh Hashana, everyone makes a particularly large contribution to the Tzedakah box as a way to start the year by caring about others.
2. Go around the table, and ask everyone in the family to make one "Tzedakah resolution" for the year to come--at least one new way they will express Tzedakah in the year to come.
3. Find out if there is a homeless shelter or food pantry in your community. Make a family project out of bringing food, clothing or other needed items to the shelter or pantry for the New Year. This can become a monthly project that lasts all year.
4. Since apples and honey are traditional foods to eat in order to start a "sweet New Year," bring fruit to a homeless shelter, or call your local Family Service agency, Federation or Jewish Family Service to see if there are ways you can contribute food or money directly to needy families in your community so they too can have a sweet new year.
5. Sponsor a synagogue-wide childrens' clothes, toy and garage sale to raise money for Tzedakah.
6. Have a break fast for Yom Kippur where a percentage of the cost of the food is contributed to a worthwhile organization (see appendix).
7. Fast on Yom Kippur, and contribute the cost of one day's worth of food to a local charity. It says in the Talmud, "The merit of a fast day lies in the Tzedakah dispensed" (Berahot 66).

8. Write a letter to members of your extended family (cousins, aunts and uncles, etc.) and urge them to participate in your High Holiday Tzedakah Fund, by either (a) contributing to your Tzedakah box for a special High Holiday contribution, (b) fasting and contributing the total cost of one day's food for themselves and their families to Tzedakah, or (c) contributing a percentage of the cost of their break fast to a hunger-related organization.

SUKKOT

1. To symbolically invite guests to eat in your Sukkah (which is a traditional Jewish custom called *ushpizin*), contribute food for meals to the local shelter or food pantry.
2. Ask your synagogue to have everyone who comes into its Sukkah during Sukkot put money into a Sukkot Tzedakah box for the hungry.
3. Have a food drive whereby everyone in the congregation brings cans and boxes of food into the Sukkah to donate to a food pantry or shelter.

HANUKAH

1. Each night of Hanukkah contribute to your Tzedakah box, and on the last night choose a cause to receive the Tzedakah.
2. Create a family Tzedakah project, whereby everyone in the family helps create a Tzedakah mural for Hanukkah as a decoration for your home. Make eight panels or scenes, each depicting an example of Tzedakah, or one for each of Maimonides' eight levels of Tzedakah (see appendix).
3. Collect good used toys from your friends and classmates, and bring them to a homeless shelter or children's hospital.

4. Have the other members of your family (and your friends with their families) join you in making Hanukah gifts for children in need. Contact Family Service or Federation agencies to find children to whom you can send your gifts for Hanukah.

5. Since Christmas is a special holiday for Christians, volunteer with other members of your family and friends to fill in at local shelters, hospitals and other service agencies on Christmas eve and Christmas day so that the Christians who work there can be home with their families.

TU B'SHVAT

1. Tu B'Shvat is the New Year of trees. Therefore, it is a good time to donate the fruits of trees to those in need, or to purchase trees in Israel with your Tzedakah money.
2. Hold a Tu B'Shvat seder, and donate a percentage of the cost of the food to a worthwhile organization (see appendix).
3. At your Tu B'Shvat seder, ask each person to come up with one thing they can do to help alleviate hunger in the world, and then pledge to do it by next Tu B'Shvat.
4. Go to a local orchard and ask the owner if he/she will participate with you in contributing fruit to the homeless and hungry in your community. Then organize friends and family to volunteer to pick the fruit and deliver it to shelters or food pantries.

PURIM

1. There is a custom of giving gifts to the poor on Purim called *mishloach manot*. Take your Tzedakah box money and donate it to a local hunger organization.

2. Ask your synagogue to donate proceeds from their Purim Carnival to help the hungry and homeless, or to select another specific cause to receive the money that is raised.

3. Set up a Tzedakah Booth at the Purim Carnival, where people can find out about worthwhile charitable organizations and/or make direct contributions to different charities.

4. Make up food baskets (with Purim goodies as well as regular wholesome and nutritious food) and have your family bring them to organizations that distribute to the needy.

PESAH

1. Since Pesah is a holiday in which we remember that we were slaves in Egypt and so must work for the freedom of others, organize a "Save Soviet Jewry," or "Save Ethiopian Jewry" campaign at your temple.

2. Ask people (starting with your family) to "adopt" a Soviet or Ethiopian family. They can write letters to and on behalf of the Soviet family, and you can help raise money to rescue an Ethiopian family from Ethiopia and help send them to Israel (see appendix).

3. Figure out how much money you and your family would spend on bread and *hametz* for a week, then donate that amount to a worthwhile organization (see appendix).

4. Run a special family Pesah Hunger Project whereby every member of the family contributes to your (or their) Tzedakah box each day of Pesah. At the end of the week have a family meeting to vote on where the money will go.

5. In keeping with the opening words of the Haggadah which say, "Let all who are hungry come and eat with us," either invite a Jewish person who doesn't have any place to go for Pesah to join with you, or

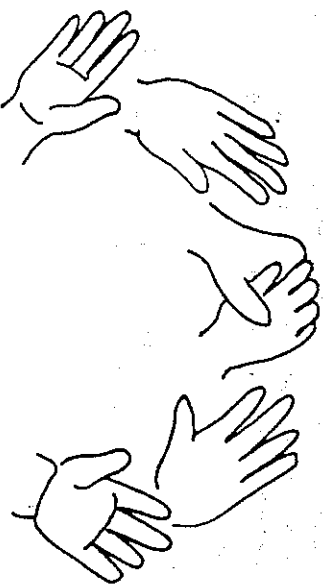
donate Tzedakah in the amount of a Pesah meal to a local shelter or hunger organization.

SHAVUOT

1. Shavuot is a traditional time to eat dairy foods, because the Torah is often likened to milk and honey. Go to a local dairy and ask them to participate with you in providing milk and other dairy products to a homeless shelter or food pantry. Have your family volunteer to bring the food to the shelter.

2. Shavuot is a time when we traditionally read the Ten Commandments to remind ourselves of our responsibilities to bring justice and righteousness into the world. Make up your own "Ten Commandments of Tzedakah" and share them with your family, religious school teacher, principal and rabbi. Post them where others can see them.

3. Have a Shavuot Tzedakah contest where everyone in your religious school class or family creates a poster on "The Ten Commandments of Tzedakah," and a prize goes to the best poster. Display all posters around your house or school.



GENERAL TZEDAKAH IDEAS

1. Put your tzedakah box next to the phone in your house. Each time someone makes a call, it becomes a "pay phone," and they must put something in the Tzedakah box.
2. Once a week (pick a night at random), have a Spare Change Tzedakah Raid. Go around to everyone in the house with your Tzedakah Box, and ask them to contribute at least half of whatever change they have in their pockets.
3. Sponsor a family Tzedakah Walkathon, Bowlahon, or Torahthon whereby you get sponsors to pledge money for Tzedakah based on the number of miles you walk pins you knock down or Jewish books you read.
4. Have a family, school or synagogue picnic with games and races for kids and adults which are "sponsored" in order to raise money for Tzedakah.

תצדקה

MAIMONIDES EIGHT LEVELS OF TZEDEKAH

- A. The best way of giving is to help a person help him/herself by entering into a partnership of helping that person find a job.
- B. The next best way of giving Tzedakah is where the person who has given doesn't know who has received the money, and the person who has received the money doesn't know who has given it.
- C. The next best way of giving Tzedakah is where the person who has given knows who is getting the money, but the person who has received the Tzedakah doesn't know who gave it.
- D. The next best case is one where the person who receives the Tzedakah knows who has given it, but the person who is giving the Tzedakah has no knowledge of the person in need.
- E. The next best case is one where the person who gives money directly to the person in need before the person has to ask.
- F. The next best case is the person who gives money directly to the person in need after being asked.
- G. Below this is a person who gives directly to the poor person, but gives less than s/he should, even though the Tzedakah is given cheerfully.
- H. Below this is the person who gives Tzedakah with a scowl.

APPENDIX

RESOURCES FOR HELPING THE HUNGRY

1. AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE, 729 Boylston Street,
Boston, MA. 02116 (617) 267 6656
2. ETHIOPIAN JEWRY ORGANIZATIONS 20005 (202) 223 2995
 - American Association For Ethiopian Jews, 2028 P. Street,
N.W. Washington, D.C. 20005 (202) 223 6838
 - North American Conference On Ethiopian Jewry, 165 East 56th
Street, #619, New York, N.Y., 10024 (212) 752 6340
3. MAZON "A Jewish Response To Hunger," 2288 Westwood
Boulevard, Suite 200, Los Angeles, CA 90064 (213) 470 7769

• For a comprehensive list of hunger organizations, order:

WHO'S INVOLVED WITH HUNGER: AN ORGANIZATION
GUIDE, World Hunger Education Service, 1317 "G" Street, NW,
Washington, D.C. 20005 (202) 223 2995

