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Women's Whispers: Holiday (mis)givings

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09/09/2010 03:54

Harbingers of the holiday season, legions of emissaries come knocking on our door this time of year. If they come while I'm digging in the garden, the men in long frocks and longer beards usually skip our house. If they knock when I'm inside, I let my spouse take care of them. Repelled by these jet-setting beggars and discomfited by my repulsion, I am pressed by these men to consider again: what is charity?

Tzedaka is a central doctrine of my parents' faith. Sacred status was ascribed to the JNF Blue Box: We dropped coins in gratitude for good tidings and in hope when news was not so good. My father donated substantial chunks of his income to the United Israel Appeal.

Every year a childhood friend of his arrived from Mea She'arim and they would spend the morning chatting in Hungarian, culminating always with a cash handover. I don't know if my father gave much to Diaspora causes; his heart and checkbook faced Jerusalem.

Going forth from my birthplace and my parents' home, I ascended into adulthood when I deposited my first paycheck. But the sense of having founded a new household came only when I signed my first *tzedaka* check. Jewish custom requires giving between a fifth and a 10th of our earnings to charity; investigating possible destinations for my checks was more thrilling than any shopping trip in Manhattan.

Charity, I believed, should provide the recipient with tools to fend for herself. In addition, a donation should have a multiplier effect, reversing a wrong and creating the opportunity for right: an instrument of social change. Within this framework, two issues touched me particularly: protection of Israel's threatened environment and Jewish education for women. I gave generously, as my parents had done.

The night before my wedding, I signed several farewell checks to cherished causes. My bridegroom followed the rule requiring charitable funds be used to alleviate poverty or support men's Torah learning, neither of which was compatible with my style of giving. He also adhered to the view permitting the deduction of living expenses from the tithed income. Even though I earned the family income, I acceded to new destinations for our money according to his principles. But I took comfort that with two mouths to feed and two apartments to maintain, the size of donations to institutions I considered sub-

optimal would be smaller than those I used to make to my pet projects.

None of my fine views on charity serves me well when I am confronted by beggars.

Maimonides and the Ashkenazi Moses Isserles instruct that if the poor ask for help, we must not send them away empty-handed. The reason given? So as not to inflict shame on them. But the rabbis do not require more than a minimal handout: a dried fig, for example.

In aggregate, however, these individual mercies become a social menace. In the era of the (admittedly flawed) welfare state, what do we accomplish by handing out coins to a beggar? Following the rabbis' reasoning, it would be much better to prevent the beggar's shame by offering counseling, job training and regular meals, rather than throwing a token as you pass.

Even more problematic are institutions that support communities with lifestyles incompatible with the modern world. Particularly in Israel, the structure of ultra-orthodox society is premised on handouts. Although these arrangements have a venerable history in the haluka system, their role in promoting the cycle of dependence and poverty is insidious. As early as I imbibed the centrality of giving, I learned that every human has the right and the duty of self-sufficiency.

Anyone relying regularly on charity should be embraced by a professional to develop a life plan that encourages independence. Today, it is the handouts, not the poverty, that have become the source of shame.

But Yehiel **Epstein**, the 19th century legal codifier and author of the *Aruch Hashulhan*, expresses a profound rebuke of my charitable philosophy. He explains that we do not only give charity to better the lives of the poor, but because of our natural Jewish compassion. In refusing the plea of the beggar before me, he implies, I diminish myself.

So how do I relate to the legions of emissaries from Israel who come knocking before the holidays? Who are they, and are they truly needy? Why are they in America collecting and not at home earning a living? Are they so successful in the begging business that it has become a profession? I cannot collude in this destructive mass movement despite its compassionate origins: We are neither in Maimonides's Middle Ages nor Isserles's preindustrial Europe.

I do not deny the plea of the emissary, but neither do I respond to his knock at our door. My spouse, the legalist, can determine if the man in the long frock is in fact collecting for the alleviation of poverty, or for male Torah scholars, or something else. After making the determination, my spouse then distributes the obligatory dried figs. Veiled behind the kitchen door, I am busily signing and sending forth my checks.

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