

Tzedakah – Dilemmas in Helping

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The Talmud (*Bava Metzia 62a*) discusses the case of two people who are traveling in the desert far from civilization and only one of them has enough water in their canteen to survive the journey. A scholar *Ben Petura* decides that it is better that they share the water and both die, rather than have one watch the death of the other. Rabbi Akiva, one of the greatest Tanna's, the first generation of scholars who shaped the traditions of rabbinic Judaism in the Mishnah, disagrees. The person who brought the water is obligated to drink all the water, if that is what is necessary to live, even though the other person will die. Rabbi Akiva has a reputation for great compassion. He is known for citing the verse in Leviticus 19 "Love your neighbor as yourself." as the principle teaching in the Torah. But in this case of self-preservation, he rules that people are obligated to save their own life first.

I studied this in rabbinical school and I thought that it was an interesting theoretical argument and had many important applications but I believed that the actual example was not one that was likely to occur in reality.

On the Friday before Labor Day weekend I was skimming through the New York Times and I came across an article "A Hiker's Plight: How to Help When Water Runs Low." To my surprise this article portrayed the dilemma from the Talmud to the T. The article describes how hikers frequently encounter strangers "gaspingside from the heat." They quote Laura Craig a Phoenix businesswoman who shared some of her extra water with distressed hikers. "If it came down to having enough for myself or helping someone, I'd have to drink my own water." Her intuitive opinion was right in line with Rabbi Akiva.

Tyler Shean, a 22 year old young man from Manor, Texas had a slightly different take on the situation. "As long as you don't trade positions completely and put yourself in danger, you usually look out for your neighbor." He described giving his water to a friend

who needed it more than he did. “ I would do everything in my power, without sacrificing myself.” Shannan Marcak a spokesperson for Grand Canyon National Park reported at least one case where someone died “ trying to provide more help than they could physically afford to provide.” similar to the position of the scholar *Ben Petura*.

In our daily lives we rarely confront such stark choices. We know that there are people in great need throughout the world who are lacking in the basic necessities required to sustain life but yet we don't feel the ethical demand as acutely. Our own needs come first. We have good reasons not to impoverish ourselves in an attempt to save as many lives as possible. If we don't take care of our own needs and obligations then we are also not able to help those who depend upon us in our families and our local communities. This being said, there is some relevance in thinking about the giving and sharing of our resources as life and death decisions.

The Hebrew word for giving to others in need is *tzedakah*. Although translated into English as the word charity in actuality the meaning is closer to the word “ justice.” Giving of *tzedakah* is doing what is the fair and right thing to do. We have an obligation to give to others in need. Because the standard is related to justice, not only to being generous, charitable, kind or even self sacrificing, we can better evaluate what are the limits and expectations related to giving. Knowing that others are suffering and are in mortal danger helps highlight the necessity of giving *tzedakah* to people in need and to organizations that can effectively intervene to save lives.

Thinking of the example of the water, I am reminded that I am required to care for myself and value my own needs above the needs of others but at the same time realize that my withholding of resources has real consequences in the world. The water may sustain my life but the lack of water can lead to the death of my neighbor.

I came upon a heartbreaking picture of a child suffering from the effects of the famine in Somalia on the OP-ED page of the NY Times on Sept . 23<sup>rd</sup>. It is entitled “ Fall” by Shirin Neshat and can be found at [nytimes.com/opinion](http://nytimes.com/opinion). To quote Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Few are guilty, but all are responsible. When we see the effects of starvation on individuals who are not to blame but live in parts of the world where violence and corruption prevail, we must shake ourselves out of our comfort zone and ask how can we help. If we were in the desert and we had extra water we would not withhold

it from the person dying of thirst. By the same token, although we may struggle to pay our bills and provide for the needs of those who rely on us we must also remember those suffering from the effect of catastrophic famine in East Africa. Nicholas Kristof's Sunday column from Sept. 17<sup>th</sup> at the same website has links to lists of organizations including American Jewish World Services that are actively working to alleviate suffering despite the political difficulties and instabilities.

During the *Yomim Noraim*, the Days Of Awe we are frequently reminded in our liturgy of the value of *tzedakah*. In *Unatana tokef*, we speak of our vulnerability as humans and our fears and hopes for the coming year. "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who shall live and who shall die. Who shall perish by fire and who by water; who by sword and who by beast; who by hunger and who by thirst?" Repentance, Prayer and Charity are the remedies offered by the liturgy to lessen the bad decree. Many of us do not accept a theology that considers continued life in the coming year as a sign of forgiveness, and death as God's punishment. But the remedies, repentance, prayer and charity are in themselves worthwhile values to live by. And our acts of *tzedaka* can at times have a God like effect on the lives of others, saving them from the fate of death by hunger and thirst. This morning as we focus on *Tzedakah*, Justice, let us recommit ourselves to giving what we can to the people and causes that alleviate suffering, spread knowledge, increase happiness and make the world a better, more just place.