

# Selected Jewish Texts on Giving



The Jewish Giving Circle Movement

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## Using Jewish Texts

Jewish texts offer a treasure trove of wisdom on an endless variety of issues, including a vast amount of wisdom on *tzedakah* and giving. Whatever you believe about God, whether you feel that Jewish law is obligatory or voluntary, and however you incorporate Judaism or Jewish values into your life, Jewish texts and traditions provide an invaluable and rich source of ideas on how to live an ethical life.

Starting with the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament), and moving through the generations of rabbis and scholars who have commented on the teachings that came before them, Jewish texts should be understood as

an evolving, ongoing conversation across the generations. The tongue-in-cheek expression, “two Jews, three opinions” describes a culture that welcomes and encourages questions and debate, all in service of understanding the many meanings of the texts and their relevance for contemporary life.

This document presents a sampling of some of the core Jewish texts about giving, with questions to guide discussions about them.<sup>1</sup> We invite you to take these texts as jumping-off points for your own thinking and that of your giving circle, to see yourself in dialogue with the generations of people who came before you who wrestled with making meaning from these texts.

Many of the texts included here come from other lists of sources, including Ziv Tzedakah Fund ([www.ziv.org](http://www.ziv.org)), Areyvut ([areyvut.org](http://areyvut.org)), and various resources on the Jewish Teen Funders Network site ([www.jfn.org](http://www.jfn.org)). There are also excellent online resources for Jewish texts writ large: Sefaria ([www.sefaria.org](http://www.sefaria.org)) is collecting and translating all of the major Jewish texts, and making them available in open-source format for anyone to use; On1Foot ([www.on1foot.org](http://www.on1foot.org)) contains sources relevant to social justice and tzedakah, along with discussion questions. Both sites enable users to make sourcesheets using the texts on the site, a valuable tool for creating materials for meetings.

<sup>1</sup>For more in-depth examinations of Jewish texts about giving, see the “Tzedakah Learning Pod” sessions developed by HEKDESH, the giving circle of alumni of the Dorot Fellowship in Israel ([www.hekdesh.org/past-learning-content](http://www.hekdesh.org/past-learning-content)), and the “Where Do You Give?” curricula developed by American Jewish World Service ([www.wheredoyougive.org](http://www.wheredoyougive.org)).

As you  
read these  
texts, ask  
yourself:



- 1 *What value is the text describing? Do you agree with the text? Why or why not?*
- 2 *What conditions might the text’s author have been responding to when it was written, and how might contemporary conditions change its meaning and relevance?*
- 3 *How does the text change your understanding of the issues you are trying to address with your giving?*
- 4 *Do you want to incorporate this value into your daily life and/or into your giving circle—and if so, what would that look like? What might stand in your way? How might the text affect your circle’s funding areas—or process—this year?*

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# ATTITUDES TOWARD GIVING

The very word that Jews use for giving - *tzedakah* - encapsulates Jewish attitudes on the topic. Unlike “charity” and “philanthropy,” which derive from Latin words meaning “love,” *tzedakah* means righteousness, fairness, justice. The poor have a right to *tzedakah* and the donor has an obligation to give it - giving is an act to create a more perfect and just world, not a favor or a voluntary act of kindness or benevolence. Every person is created in the image of God, and thus must be treated with equality and empathy.

› **One who mocks the poor insults his maker.**

PROVERBS 17:5

› Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter - when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear.

ISAIAH 58:7-8

› **The rich and the poor meet together; God is the maker of them all.**

PROVERBS 22:2

› Rav Abin said: The poor man stands at your door and the Holy One stands at the right of the poor man. If you have given to him, know that He who stands to his right will give you your reward; but if you have not given him, know that He who stands on his right will exact punishment. This world is like a wheel for drawing water from a well; the full pail empties and the empty pail fills.

VAYIKRA RABBAH 34:9

Hillel said, do not separate yourself from the community...and do not judge your fellow until you arrive at the same situation.

PIRKEI AVOT 2:4

› **“Greet every person with a pleasant countenance.” (Pirkei Avot 1:15 - Teaching of Shammai) What does this mean? It teaches us that even if a person gives someone the most precious gifts in the world but his face is gloomy, then the Torah considers it as if he gave nothing. But one who greets his friend with a pleasant countenance is considered to have given the best gifts in the world, even if he did not actually give any gifts at all.**

AVOT D'RABBI NATAN, CHAPTER 13

› Anyone who gives *tzedakah* to a poor person with a scowl and causes him to be embarrassed, even if he gave him a thousand zuz, has destroyed and lost any merit thereby. Rather, one should give cheerfully, with happiness [to do so] and empathy for his plight, as it is said (in Job 30:25), “Did I not weep for the unfortunate? Did I not grieve for the needy?”

MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, GIFTS TO THE POOR, 10:4

› **Only one response can maintain us in our lives: gratefulness for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve, to adore and to fulfill. It is gratefulness which makes the soul great.**

RABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL, MAN'S QUEST FOR GOD, P. 5.

› **Rabbi Yannai once saw a person giving money to a poor man in public. He said: “It would have been better for you to give him nothing, than giving as you did. You caused him embarrassment.”**

TALMUD, CHAGIGAH 5A

› It is forbidden to speak harshly to a poor person or to raise your voice in a shout, for his heart is broken and crushed... And woe to anyone who shames a poor person! Woe to him! Rather, let him be like a father to him, in compassion and in words, as it is said (in Job 29:15) “I was a father to the needy.”

MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, LAWS OF GIFTS TO THE POOR, 10:5

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## BIBLICAL LAWS ABOUT GIVING

Biblical laws about giving were mostly tied to the agrarian nature of Israelite society at the time when the Hebrew Bible was written. A thought-provoking way of understanding their relevance for today is offered by a recent translator of Maimonides' commentary on these laws:

The names of the gifts for the poor, given by the rabbis of the Talmud, offer psychological insight into the nature of poverty. They include *peah*, indicating the “edge” of the field, *leket*, the “overlooked gleanings,” *peret*, the “separated fruit,” principally grapes, *olelot*, the “malformed grape clusters,” and *shikhecha*, the “forgotten” sheaf [of wheat] of the field. It is perhaps no coincidence that the names of the produce given to the poor allude to the kind of people who happen to commonly be poor: those living on the “edge” of society, the “overlooked,” the “separated,” frequently the “malformed,” and often the “forgotten.” The names of the produce for the poor remind the giver of the marginalized members of the community.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Meszler “Gifts for the Poor: Moses Maimonides’ Treatise on Tzedakah,” ed. Marc Lee Raphael (Williamsburgh, VA: College of William and Mary, 2003)

› Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your yield of that year, but leave it within your settlements. Then the Levite, who has no hereditary portion [of land] as you have, and the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your settlements shall come and eat their fill, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the enterprises you undertake.

DEUTERONOMY 14:28-29

› **For your God is the God of all and the master of all, the great, mighty and awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.**

DEUTERONOMY 10:17-19

If however, there is a needy person among you...do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs...For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land; therefore I command you: “You shall surely open your hand to your poor and needy kinsman, in your land.”

DEUTERONOMY 15:7-8;11

› Six years you shall sow your land and gather its yield, but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the needy among your people may eat; and what they leave behind, the wild beasts may eat. You should do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive groves.

EXODUS 23:10-11

› **And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I the Lord am your God.**

LEVITICUS 19:9-10

› When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf in the field, do not turn back to get it; it shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow—in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat down the fruit of your olive trees, do not go over them again; that shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not pick it over again; that shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, the widow. Always remember that you were a slave in Egypt; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment.

DEUTERONOMY 24:19-22

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## COLLECTIVE & COMMUNAL GIVING

At least since the second century C.E., Jews have had communal systems for giving. Stemming in part from a desire to protect the anonymity of both donor and recipient, and in part from a desire to simplify the complexity of a society where everyone was obligated to give, Jews created institutions like the kuppah (the communal fund) and the tamchui (public soup kitchen). These texts demonstrate the value and importance of collective giving in Jewish communities.

› The sages said in the name of Rabbi Eleazar: What is the meaning of: “And he put on charity as a coat of mail” (Isaiah 59:17)? It tells us that, just as in a coat of mail each and every scale joins the other to form one large piece of armor, so every small coin given to charity combines with the rest to form a large sum. Hence, Rabbi Hanina said: The same lesson may be learned from “All of our acts of charity [together] are as a resplendent garment” (Isaiah 64:5). Just as in a garment each and every thread unites with the others to form a whole garment, so every small coin given to charity unites with the rest to form a large sum.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD,  
BABA BATRA 9B

› There was a secret chamber in the *Beit HaMikdash* [Temple] where pious people would leave money in secret and those who had been well-to-do but had become poor would come and take in secret.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD,  
SHEKALIM 5:6

Every Jewish community has a *tzedakah* fund. We have never seen or heard of a Jewish community that does not have a *tzedakah* fund.

MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, LAWS OF GIFTS TO THE POOR, 9:3

› **Our rabbis taught: The charity fund [*kupah*] is collected by two people and distributed by three people. It is collected by two people, for we do not appoint authority over the public in less than two people. And it is distributed by three people – similar to civil law (which requires a minimum court of three to make decisions).... The emergency food fund is collected by three and distributed by three, for the collection and the distribution are equal.**

BABYLONIAN TALMUD,  
BABA BATRA 8B

› A person who compels others to give charity and motivates them to do so receives a greater reward than the person who actually gives, as [alluded to by Isaiah 32:17]: “And the deed of charity is peace.”

With regard to the collectors of charity and the like can be applied [the words of praise, Daniel 12:3]: “Those who bring merit to the many are like the stars.”

MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, LAWS OF GIFTS TO THE POOR, 10:6

› **A person who dwells in a city for thirty days is forced to give *tzedakah* to the *kupah* with the rest of the residents of the city. If one dwelt there three months they force that person to give to the *tamhui*. If one dwelt there six months they force that person to give *tzedakah* for clothing to clothe the poor. If one dwelt there nine months they force that person to give *tzedakah* for the burial fund which provides all the burial requirements for the poor.**

MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, LAWS OF GIFTS TO THE POOR 9:12

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## CULTIVATING A HABIT OF GIVING

Judaism is a religion with many habitual behaviors. Whether it is praying regularly, offering blessings before and after each meal, celebrating Shabbat every week, holidays throughout the year, and so on, part of the purpose of this repetition is to train the body, heart and soul. So too with *tzedakah*: the sources here argue that by giving repeatedly, we train ourselves to care about those who are in need.

The value of money, and the material possessions it purchases, lies as a means rather than an end. The correct use of money is an opportunity, a challenge to make the right choices and emerge more holy.

RAV TZADOK HAKOHANE, MACHSHAVOT CHARUTZ 7

› **Justice, justice you shall pursue (Deut. 16:20). For one who pursues the doing of *tzedakah* and good deeds will find life, prosperity and honor (Prov. 21:21). And one should make sure not to abstain from the half shekel that is required each year. (A person should give) every month even, or every week, each person**

**according to their means. And every day a person should make sure not to abstain from putting a little something in all of the cans (for collecting *tzedakah*) before prayer. And when the time for tithing arrives one should give.**

RABBENU ASHER (ASHER BEN JEHIEL), ORCHOT CHAIM, DAY 4, NUMBER 68

› Good character traits do not come to a person by the greatness of a deed but rather by the frequency with which he does it. To acquire good character traits one needs to do good deeds over and over; doing one great act will not inculcate good character traits. For example, If a person gave 1000 *dinarim* [coins] to one person to whom it was fitting to give them, this one great deed will not accustom him to the quality of generosity to the same degree as if he gave 1000 *dinarim* to 1000 different people, [giving each one *dinar*, provided] he gave every *dinar* with a generous spirit. For by repeating the deed of generosity 1000 times, he establishes a firm tendency [within his character]. By contrast, the one great deed represents a single time in which his soul was aroused to positive activity, and afterwards this desire is no longer felt.

MAIMONIDES, COMMENTARY TO MISHNA AVOT 3:15

› **The commandment of lending to the poor:**

**The reason behind this commandment is that God wanted His creatures to be habituated and accustomed to the attribute of compassion and kindness, because it is a praiseworthy character trait, and by inculcating good character traits they will be worthy of receiving good [from God], for good and blessing can only be bestowed on good and not on its opposite. By God bestowing goodness to those who are good, His desire to bring goodness to the world will be fulfilled. Were it not for this purpose, God, Blessed is He, would give the poor all they need without our getting involved; but it is out of His kindness that He lets us be His messengers - for our benefit.**

SEFER HACHINUCH 66

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## HOW MUCH TO GIVE

Many people seek a hard-and-fast answer to this question—a quantitative metric to measure up to, even if they don't follow it exactly. Although Jewish texts provide suggested percentages of income for giving, there are no simple answers here. Should it be a percentage of one's income or net worth?

Using pre- or post-tax dollars? (And what about the idea that taxes today cover a lot of what many people consider to be 'charitable' expenditures?) Does all giving count towards the percentage—even if it isn't anything like what the rabbis imagined giving to be?

Use these texts as jumping off points for a conversation about what feels right to you—percentages or numbers that are personally meaningful and that enable you to align your giving with your values.

› A person shouldn't give more than a fifth of his income [to *tzedakah*] lest he himself come to be in need of charity.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD,  
KETUBOT 5A

› One is commanded to give to a poor person according to what he lacks. If he has no clothes, they clothe him. If he has no utensils for a house, they buy [them] for him. If he does not have a wife, they arrange a marriage for him. If [the poor person] is a woman, they arrange a husband for marriage for her. Even if it was the custom of [a person who was rich but is now] a poor person to ride on a horse with a servant running in front of him, and this is a person who fell from his station, they buy him a horse to ride upon and a servant to run in front of him, as it is said (in Deuteronomy 15:8) "Sufficient for whatever he needs." You are commanded to fill whatever he lacks, but you are not commanded to make him wealthy.

MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, GIFTS TO THE POOR, 7:3

› If a poor person comes and asks for what is sufficient to fill his needs and one does not have the means to provide it for him, one gives according to his means. How much is this? One-fifth of one's assets is the best possible way, but one-tenth is the usual way. Less than this is a bad sign, and never should one restrain himself from a third of a shekel a year. Anyone who has not given at least this much has not fulfilled the *mitzvah*. Even a poor person who lives on *tzedakah* is obligated to give *tzedakah* to another.

MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, GIFTS TO THE POOR, 7:5

› It is forbidden to turn away a poor person who asks empty handed, even if you give him a simple dry fig, as it is said (in Psalms 74:21) "Let not the downtrodden be turned away disappointed."

MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, GIFTS TO THE POOR, 7:7

› Never allow your mind to entertain the perverse thought, "I can't afford to give charity to others, for it will diminish what I have for myself!" Because one must never forget that his money does not belong to him in the first place – it all belongs to God, Who has temporarily deposited His money with you to handle it according to His wishes. And it is God's will that you distribute of it to the poor. Indeed, the most precious part of your wealth is what you give to the poor, as it says (Isaiah 58:8): "And your charity shall go before you [to your eternal reward]."

YAAKOV BEN ASHER, TUR, YOREH DEAH 247

Never has anyone become poor by giving to *tzedakah*, nor has anything bad ever come of it, nor has any harm occurred because of *tzedakah*, as it is said (in Isaiah 32:17) "The work of righteousness is peace." Anyone who shows compassion, others will show compassion to him.

MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, LAWS OF GIFTS TO THE POOR, 10:2

› The amount one should give to *tzedakah*: If one can afford it, enough to answer all the needs of the poor people. But if one cannot afford that much, then one should give up to a fifth of one's possession. Which is doing the *mitzvah* in an exceptional fashion—one tenth is an average percentage, and less is considered miserly. And one should not give away more than a fifth, lest he or she ultimately become dependent on others.

SHULHAN ARUKH, YOREH DE'AH 249:1



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## THE IMPORTANCE OF GIVING

*Tzedakah* was considered one of the most important positive commandments (*i.e.* something one is commanded to do, as opposed not to do). The Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgy tells us that, even if one has sinned and been sentenced to die, *tzedakah* is one of the three acts - along with repentance and prayer - that can convince God to change our fate for the better. We are all responsible for each other, Jewish tradition teaches us, and our purpose on earth is to make the world a better, more just and equitable place.

> We must be especially careful to observe the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*, more so than any other positive *mitzvah*, for *tzedakah* is a sign of the righteous [*tzadik*] lineage of Abraham, our father, as it is said (in Genesis 18:19), “For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity [to keep the way of the Lord] by doing what is just and right.” The throne of Israel is established and the religion of truth stands only on *tzedakah*, as it is said (in Isaiah 54:14) “You shall be established through righteousness [*tzedek*]. And Israel will only be redeemed through *tzedakah*, as it is said (in Isaiah 1:27) “Zion shall be saved in the judgment; her repentant ones, in the retribution [*tzedakah*].”  
MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, LAWS OF GIFTS TO THE POOR, 10:1

# Charity is equal in importance to all the other commandments combined.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, BABA BATRA 9A

> **If a person closes his eyes to avoid giving charity, it is as if he committed idolatry.**

BABYLONIAN TALMUD,  
KETUBOT 68A

> **[Hillel] used to say, the more *tzedakah* the more *shalom* [peace, fullness].**

PIRKEI AVOT 2:8

> Rabbi Yehuda says: Ten strong things have been created in the world. The rock is hard, but the iron cleaves it. The iron is hard, but the fire softens it. The fire is hard, but the water quenches it. The water is strong, but the clouds bear it. The clouds are strong, but the wind scatters them. The wind is strong, but the body bears it. The body is strong, but fright crushes it. Fright is strong, but wine banishes it. Wine is strong, but sleep works it off. Death [which is the ultimate sleep] is stronger than all, and charity saves from death, as it is written (Proverbs 10:2) “*Tzedakah* saves from death.”  
BABYLONIAN TALMUD,  
BABA BATRA, 10A

> **The world rests on a single pillar: righteousness [*tzadik*—the root of the work *tzedakah*].**

BABYLONIAN TALMUD,  
CHAGIGA 12B

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## MORE THAN MONEY— GOOD DEEDS (GEMILUT CHASADIM)

While giving *tzedakah* is obligatory, deeds of loving-kindness and benevolence are voluntary. Jewish tradition singled out particular good deeds as extremely important, including visiting the sick, attending funerals, comforting mourners, and redeeming captives. The concept of *gemilut chasadim* expands the notion of obligatory *tzedakah* - obligatory righteousness - into the area of voluntary kindness.

These texts can open a discussion of whether Jewish tradition seems to be privileging or placing a higher priority on either *tzedakah* or *gemilut chasadim*, and the importance of having both in a person - and a circle's - behavioral repertoire.

› Our Rabbis taught: Deeds of loving-kindness are superior to charity in three respects. Charity can be accomplished only with money; deeds of loving-kindness can be accomplished through personal involvement as well as with money. Charity can be given only to the poor; deeds of loving-kindness can be done for both poor and rich. Charity applies only to the living; deeds of loving-kindness apply to both the living and the dead.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD,  
SUKKAH 49B

› Shimon [the son of Rabban Gamliel] says: It is not what one says, but rather what one does, that makes all the difference in the world.

PIRKEI AVOT 1:17

› Whoever gives even a small coin to a poor man receives six blessings, but whoever speaks reassuringly to him receives eleven blessings.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD,  
BABA BATRA 9A

› Three signs identify this [the Jewish] people: they are merciful, they are modest, they perform deeds of loving-kindness.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD,  
YEVAMOT 79A

› If a poor person asks of you [to give him something], and you do not have anything in your possession to give to him, comfort him with words.

MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH  
TORAH, LAWS OF GIFTS  
TO THE POOR, 10:5

› R. Simlai expounded: Torah begins with an act of *gemilut chasadim* and ends with an act of *gemilut chasadim*. It begins with an act of benevolence, for it is written: "And God made garments of skin for Adam his wife, and clothed them"; and it ends with an act of benevolence, for it is written, "And He buried him [Moses] in the valley."

BABYLONIAN TALMUD  
SOTA 14A

› Happy is he who performs a good deed. It may tip the scale for him and the world.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD,  
KIDDUSHIN 40B

› The world stands on three things: On the Torah, on the service of God and on acts of loving-kindness.

PIRKEI AVOT 1:2

A person who runs to do just, good, and kind deeds attains life, success, and honor.

PROVERBS 21:2

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## OBLIGATION TO GIVE

In Jewish tradition, *tzedakah* is mandatory. Interestingly, although many contemporary Jews pick and choose which commandments (if any) they will follow, giving *tzedakah* is still deeply ingrained into many Jews' behaviors. A 2013 study of American Jewish giving, *Connected to Give*, found that 76% of Jewish people surveyed said they had given to charity last year, compared to 63% of other Americans.

In an age when only a subset of Jews feel "commanded" to do anything, it's interesting to consider both why giving *tzedakah* is still so prevalent and why the notion of being obligated to give - by God, by tradition, and/or by communal norms - might still resonate with even non-observant Jews.

› God purposely created a world filled with opportunities to give *tzedakah*. God has no lack of resources. He could easily have created a world of universal wealth, wherein everyone was wealthy and no one was poor. Why did He not do so? This question was posed to God by King David. The Midrash records the following dialogue based on a verse in Psalms 61:8. David said to God, "Equalize Your world! Why must there be such a huge economic disparity between the rich and the poor?" God replied: "If I make all people economically equal, who will practice kindness and charity?"

**Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz of Mir explained: God did not create the precept of charity because he saw that there were poor people in the world who needed help. Rather, the exact opposite is true. God purposely created poor people in order to give people of means an opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah of *tzedakah*. A world devoid of opportunities to show kindness to others is inconceivable; compassion is the purpose of this world.**

RABBI AVRAHAM CHAIM FEUER,  
THE TZEDAKAH TREASURY, P.  
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› It is not your obligation to finish the work; nor are you free to desist from it.

PIRKEI AVOT 2:16

› You shall not close your hand to your fellow man who is poor.

DEUTERONOMY 15:

› All Jews are responsible for one another.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD  
SHAVUOT 39A

› In an emergency, the responsibility to sustain the poor rests on the individual. Over time the responsibility shifts to rest on the community.

COMMENTARY BY  
MOSES ISSERLES ON  
KETUBOT 67B

› When a person eats and drinks at the festive meal he is obligated to provide food for the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, along with the rest of the poor and despondent. But whoever locks the doors of the courtyard, and eats and drinks with his wife and children, and does not provide food and drink for poor or suffering people, this is not a "*mitzvah* celebration," but a "celebration of the belly"...and this kind of celebration is a disgrace.

MAIMONIDES,  
MISHNEH TORAH, LAWS  
OF THE FESTIVALS 6:18

› One is commanded to give to a poor person according to what he lacks. If he has no clothes, they clothe him. If he has no utensils for a house, they buy [them] for him. If he does not have a wife, they arrange a marriage for him. If [the poor person] is a woman, they arrange a husband for marriage for her. Even if it was the custom of [a person who was rich but is now] a poor person to ride on a horse with a servant running in front of him, and this is a person who fell from his station, they buy him a horse to ride upon and a servant to run in front of him, as it is said (in Deuteronomy 15:8)

"Sufficient for whatever he needs." You are commanded to fill whatever he lacks, but you are not commanded to make him wealthy.  
MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, GIFTS TO THE POOR, 7:3

Even a poor man who himself survives on charity should give charity.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, GITTIN 7B

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## TYPES OF GIVING

Maimonides' "ladder" of eight types of giving is perhaps the most well-known attempt in Jewish tradition to prioritize and attach value to different ways that one can give.

Although many people think that the highest level of Jewish giving is anonymous giving, Maimonides actually articulates a higher level: one where the giver and the recipient enter into a partnership such that the recipient can achieve economic independence. It's worth discussing the contemporary equivalents of this type of giving.

Another issue your circle might spend time discussing is the place of anonymity in contemporary giving. Prescriptions that giving be anonymous derive from the desire to protect the dignity of the recipient of *tzedakah* - but how to interpret this when one gives to organizations rather than individuals?

Good organizations will want to leverage contributions from trusted philanthropists, foundations and giving circles for fundraising from other sources - and along the same lines, you and your giving circle may purposefully seek out information on who else is funding a particular organization. What role does anonymity play?

There are eight levels in charity, each level surpassing the other.

8. The highest level beyond which there is none is a person who supports a Jew who has fallen into poverty [by] giving him a present or a loan, entering into partnership with him, or finding him work so that his hand will be fortified so that he will not have to ask others [for alms]

7. A lower level than this is one who gives charity to the poor without knowing to whom he gave and without the poor person knowing from whom he received

6. A lower level than that is an instance when the giver knows to whom he is giving, but the poor person does not know from whom he has received

5. A lower level than that is an instance when the poor person knows from whom he took, but the donor does not know to whom he gave

4. A lower level than that is giving [the poor person] in his hand before he asks.

3. A lower level than that is giving him after he asks.

2. A lower level than this is giving him less than what is appropriate, but with a pleasant countenance.

1. A lower level than that is giving him with sadness.

MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, LAWS ON GIVING TO THE POOR,

10:7-14

› For when someone dedicates to Heaven that which belongs to him or builds something paying for it himself, who can prevent him having his name recorded since no one has a right to prevent another from making any stipulation he wishes when donating such gifts....the Torah itself...acknowledges and spreads abroad the reports of those who carry out a *mitzvah*.

RESPONSA OF THE RASHBA, SOLOMON IBN ADRET, NO. 581

› Let not a man show off with the charity he gives. If he does show off, not only does he not receive a reward, he is even to be punished for so doing. However, if one sanctifies something for charity, he is permitted to write his name upon it, that it may be a memorial for him. And it is proper to do this.

RABBI MOSES ISSERLES, HAMAPAH, YOREH DEAH 249:13

› One who lends money is greater than one who performs charity, and one who forms a partnership is greater than all. BABYLONIAN TALMUD, SHABBAT 63A

› The redemption of captives held for ransom takes precedence over sustaining the poor and clothing them. You do not find a *mitzvah* greater than the redemption of captives, for captivity is in the same category as famine, drought, or exposure, and stands in danger to one's life.

MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, GIFTS TO THE POOR, 8:10

› One who gives charity in secret is greater than Moses. BABYLONIAN TALMUD, BABA BATRA 9A

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# WHOM TO GIVE TO

UNIVERSALISM VS.  
PARTICULARISM

Jewish texts about giving emerge from contexts where Jews only gave to other Jews, long before there was even an option to do otherwise. Either Jews took care of their own needy and their own communal institutions, or no one would - and because of antisemitism, even in the U.S. until after WWII, wealthy Jews were seldom welcome to become major donors to or board members of non-Jewish institutions.

Today, however, as with all aspects of Jewish life, giving to Jewish causes is entirely voluntary. Although it is still true that Jewish causes are primarily, if not exclusively, supported by Jewish givers, Jews are certainly more than able (and encouraged) to give to any type of organization.

The vexing issue thus emerges: how much to give to Jewish vs. non-Jewish causes?

Jewish texts offer a variety of ways to think about this question. Starting from a place of “charity begins at home,” commentators prioritize different categories of recipients. It’s helpful to reflect on the contexts in which these texts emerged, and also to think about the ways they might be interpreted today in the light of the very different circumstances in which most Jews live today.

› All Israel and all who are associated with them are like brothers, as it is said, “You are children of the Lord your God” (DEUTERONOMY 14:1). And if a brother does not show compassion for another brother, then who will have compassion for him? And to whom can the poor of Israel look? To the idolatrous nations that hate them and pursue them? They can only look to rely upon their brothers. MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, LAWS OF GIFTS TO THE POOR, 10:2

› **A poor person who is a relative takes precedence over anyone else. The poor of one’s household take precedence over the poor of one’s city. The poor of one’s city take precedence over the poor of another city.** MAIMONIDES, MISHNEH TORAH, GIFTS TO THE POOR, 7:13

› The laws of priority in giving refer solely to communal monies, whereas individual donations can be given to anyone we deem to be in need. IGGERET MOSHE, YOREH DEAH 1:144

› **Do not separate yourself from the community** PIRKEI AVOT 2:4

› It is well known that every wealthy person has many more relatives who are poor, and how much more is that true for people whose *tzedakah* funds are scant! And if this is the case, poor people without wealthy relatives will die of starvation... Certainly every person, whether of modest or significant means, is obligated to give a portion of his [or her] *tzedakah* money to needy people who are not relatives. But to his [or her] poor relatives, he [or she] should give a greater amount than is given to those who are not related. ARUCH HASHULCHAN, YOREH DE’AH 251:4

› If a person has enough food in his house and wishes to use it for charitable purposes to support others, he should first support his father and mother; if there is anything left he should support his brothers and sisters; if there is anything left he should support his other relatives; if there is anything left he should support his neighbors; if there is anything left he should support those who live on the same street. Thereafter he should distribute charity liberally to the rest of Israel. MIDRASH TANA DEVEI ELIYAHU CHAPTER 27

› **All Israel is responsible for one another.** BABYLONIAN TALMUD, SANHEDRIN 27B

› **Greater need precedes lesser need...the poor of a person’s own city have precedence over the poor of another city, and the poor among a person’s relatives have precedence over non-relatives. On this [my teacher] writes: the reference to relative need comes first to teach us that the poor of a person’s own city have priority of those of another city only if both are in need of basic food and clothing. But if the poor of a person’s own city have enough for their basic needs but no more, while the poor of another city do not have enough for their basic needs, then the latter have precedence.** MOSES SCHREIBER, RESPONSA CHATAM SOFER, YOREH DE’AH 231

Our rabbis have taught: We support the non-Jewish poor along with the poor of Israel, and visit the sick of the non-Jews, along with the sick of Israel, and bury the poor of the non-Jews, along with the dead of Israel, in the interests of peace.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, GITTIN 61A