

The Ethics and Pro-Social Values of Judaism

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Jewish Values

Pro-social Values: *Ethical Monotheism*

Abraham was the first to link individual belief and worship in the one God to social values and responsibilities. The ethical principles of monotheism recognize “that there is one Creative Source of the one creation, but that this very unity conveys a moral imperative concerning ethical treatment and conduct” in creation itself (Genesis 18:19). Study and practice of these ethical principles not only constitute individual worship, but lead to the establishment of just social systems and the promotion of the common good.

Many of the Jewish virtues (*midot*) are also commandments (*mitzvot*), the practice of every one of which brings one closer to God and fulfills God’s purpose for humanity. Of the 613 Jewish laws, 248 are positive commandments (things to do), and 365 negative commandments (things *not* to do). While many concern the individual’s relationship with God (*Mitzvot Bayn Adam La Makom*), more than half of the mitzvot that apply today govern interpersonal relations (*Hilchos Bein Adam L’Chavero*), and relate to a comprehensive range of everyday social interactions. These form the basic moral guidelines and ethical parameters of how Jews are commanded to treat others.

The Hebrew Prophets and Talmudic Rabbis have made clear that while commandments between individuals and God are extremely important, God commanded that ethical behavior toward one another is of greater importance and concern. King Solomon asserted that “To do righteousness and justice is preferred by God above sacrifice (Prov. 21:3) Self-cultivation and scholarship are not only forms of worship, but ways of apprehending the meaning and form of ethical living. Judaism is thus pre-eminently relationship-oriented, focusing on the relationship between God and humanity, God and the Jewish community, and social relationships.

Rabbi Akiva famously observed that the greatest principle in Torah is to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Palestinian Talmud, Nedarim 9:4). Famed scholar Hillel added to this by summarizing all of Judaism in the sentence: “What is hateful to you, do not do to others,” adding that “the rest is commentary. Now go and study.” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a) The understanding is that Torah is an explication of the manner of living an ethical life.

The “ethical life” in Judaism is celebrated as a source of *simhah*, which Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes as “the happiness we share,” or “the happiness we make by sharing.” (Sacks, 5)¹ It is understood that our deeds – our values and responsibilities reflected in

¹ Sacks, Jonathan. *To Heal a Fractured World*.

our behavior – are what concretely link us to our larger community as well as to God. “Faith” and “works” are not distinguished in Judaism, as it is “by our deeds that we express our faith and make it real in the life of others and in the world.” (Sacks, 5)

It is telling that God’s commandments for the Jewish people and good deeds are given the same word: *mitzvoth*. These practices are not simply for expedient or feel-good purposes, but rather represent obligations at the heart of Jewish belief, worship and community.² These are laid out in specific detail in Scripture and laws, and Jews are commanded by God to “Learn them and be careful to perform them” (Deut. 5:1; Yevamoth 109b). After all, Judaism affirms that the study of Torah is only truly meaningful when it leads to actual observance of the *mitzvoth* (Avot 1:17; Kidushin 40b; Yayikra Rabba 35:6; R. Judah Loewe, *Netivot Olam, Gemilut Chassadim*, ch. 2.)

The Covenantal Community: Abrahamic Fraternity

The emphasis on ethical practice speaks to a strong sense of mutual responsibility (*Averut; Kol Yisrael Arevim; Shavuot 39a*) and community identity (*Klal Yisrael; Kehillah*).³ Jews are asked to not hate fellow Jews (Lev. 19:17) and to love one another (*Ahavat Yisrael*) (Lev. 19:18), including converts (Deut. 10:19).

God’s covenant with the Jewish people is not based on individual commitments but rather with the community. The Jewish community as a whole is asked to repent to God (Rosh HaShanah 17b-18a), is subject to God’s punishment or forgiveness (Berachot 12b). In the covenantal relationship, the community is God’s partner in the improvement of creation and the perfection of the world. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls this “ethics of responsibility...one of Judaism’s most distinctive and challenging ideas...” (Sacks, 3) He adds, “Life is God’s call to responsibility.” (ibid)

The individual thus adds merit to his or her community or sin based on their deeds (Yuma 87a) and is asked to strive for, even suffer for the sake of his or her community (Ketuvot 8b). Separation from or harm to the community is viewed with grave concern (Rosh HaShanah 17a). Moses provides a paradigmatic example of individual commitment to the welfare of the community. The Talmud states:

“When the community is in trouble do not say, “I will go home and eat and drink and all will be well with me.”...Rather, involve yourself in the community’s distress... as was demonstrated by Moses (Exodus 27:12) In this way Moses said, “Since Israel is in trouble, I will share their burden.” Anyone who shares a community’s distress will be rewarded and will witness the community’s consolation.” (*Ta’anit 11a*)

² Jewish worship thus concerns the contemplation and practice of immutable, definite rules concerning personal behavior and social values emanating from God. The Mishnah outlines all of Jewish law and the technical details of observance. The Torah articulates absolute truths while establishing guidelines, priorities and values for Jews to live by.

³ The song *Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Lazeh* summarizes the meaning of *arevut: Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Lazeh* (“All Jews are responsible for each other”), *Kol Yisrael achim* (“All Jews are “brothers”), *Am echad lev echad* (“One people with one heart”), *Am echad shteym echad* (“One people, each pair is one”), *Am echad ke-ish echad* (“One people, as if they are one person”), *Shmah Yisrael, am echad* (“Hear Israel! One people”).

Mutual and collective responsibility is a deep, ethical concern. The Talmudic sage Hillel explains the importance of social welfare by asking "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am for myself alone, what am I?" (Ethics of the Fathers 1:14). The active involvement in the community is also strongly encouraged on spiritual grounds:

If a person of learning participates in public affairs and serves as judge and arbiter, he gives stability to the land. But if he sits in his home and says to himself, "What have the affairs of society to do with me?... Why should I trouble myself with the people's voices of protest? Let my soul dwell in peace! – if he does this, he overthrows the world. (*Tanshuma To Mishpatim*)

At the same time, community activism is also central to the commitment to social justice at the heart of the covenant with God.

JUSTICE, JUSTICE SHALL YOU PURSUE

In one of the rare occasions where a word is repeated twice in Torah, God commands for emphasis that "Tzedek, tzedek tirdof" (Justice, justice shall you pursue.) (Deut. 16:20) The practice of justice and the seeking of a just society are divine commandments for Jews. While cultivating a pious life through study and contemplation is at the heart of Jewish worship of God, Torah makes clear that that piety must necessarily translate in society through a striving for justice. The pursuit of justice itself, or the striving against injustice is a path to piety in Judaism.

Even the righteous and those that practice other *mitzvot* can be punished by God for failure to protest against injustice. Silence or passivity in effect communicate compliance or acquiescence to what is wrong.⁴ As Holocaust survivor Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself." Jews are to pursue justice no matter how remote the possibility of achieving it or overcoming injustice: Rabbi Tarfon famously explained in the Mishnah that "It is not your obligation to complete the task. But neither are you free to desist from it."

It is in the name of righteousness that the symbolic betrothal of the Jewish people and God is made:

And I will betroth you unto Me forever; and *I will betroth you unto Me in righteousness, justice, loving kindness, and compassion.* And I will betroth you unto Me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord. (Hosea 2:21-22, italics added)

Rabbi Meir adds that the purpose of the verse "And you shall know the Lord" is "To teach that whosoever has in himself all these attributes knows the will of G-d. (Avot de Rabbi Nathan, ch. 37)."

⁴ The Babylonian Talmud states that: "Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of his own family and does not do so is punished [liable, held responsible] for the transgressions of his family. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the people of his community and does not do so is punished for the transgressions of his community. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the entire world and does not do so is punished for the transgressions of the entire world. (*Shabbat 54b*)

Empathic Justice

Rabbi Emanuel Rackman observed that Judaism teaches a “special kind of justice”, an *empathic justice*, which

“...seeks to make people identify with each another – with each other’s needs, with each other’s hopes and aspirations, with each other’s defeats and transformations. Because Jews have known the distress of slaves and the loneliness of strangers, we are to project ourselves into their souls and make their plight our own.”⁵

Jewish history teaches that God is deeply moved by the plight of the suffering and the oppressed. Exodus was “the decisive event in the creation of the chosen people,” a “momentous occasion” showing “that the Lord of the universe was at work correcting oppression and liberating the poor.” (Sider, 44)⁶ God proclaims that

“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.” (Exodus 3:7-8)

Jewish history and teaching also make clear that God is actively involved in the righting of wrongs and intervening in history: “The Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.” (Deut. 26:5-8) God is also mindful of his covenantal relationship with the people of Israel (Exodus 6:5-7):

I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant [with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob]... I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burden of the Egyptians.”

It is clear from the Bible that God “wanted his people to know him as the One who freed them from slavery and oppression.” (Sider, 43) God begins the Ten Commandments with the reminder that “I am the Lord, your God, who took you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” (Deut. 5:6; Ex. 20:2) Sider writes that “The God of the Bible wants to be known as the liberator of the oppressed.” (Sider, 43)

Isaiah proclaims that “The Lord of Hosts shall be exalted in justice, The Holy God shows Himself holy in righteousness.” (Isaiah 5:16) For Jews, emulating God in worship also means following the command “you shall eradicate evil in your midst” (Deut 13:6; 17:7; 21:21; 24:7) in the struggle to create a just and moral society. The Bible carries a number of commandments in support of this effort. Exodus affirms the importance of equal justice for the poor (Exod. 23:6; Deut. 16:18). The Psalms speaks to the role of the just ruler who would receive divine aid: “That he may judge Thy people with righteousness

⁵ In Schwartz, Richard H. *Judaism and Global Survival*; Lantern Books, NY. (2001), p. 27.

⁶ Sider, Ronald. *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*.

(*tzedek*) and Thy poor with justice (*mishpat*).” The verse goes on to add: “May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.” (Psa. 72:2, 4).

The pursuit of justice (*Dirshu Mishpat*) and establishing a system of justice (*Shoftim*) are thus at the heart of the covenantal relationship, and the practice of it “is considered among the highest demands of prophetic religion.” (Schwartz, 26). Samson R. Hirsh writes that

Tzedek, ‘right’, ‘justice’ is the firm, incorruptible right as proclaimed by God in His Law. ‘*Mishpat*’ is the lawful order deriving therefrom. These two concepts constitute the prime indispensable basis for the state founded upon Divine Law.” (In Sicker, 92).⁷

Justice involves securing the right to something that an individual is entitled to, giving according to proper merits, and protecting and upholding these principles for the most vulnerable in society. Along these lines, Hirsh writes that

“*Mishpatim*, therefore, are God’s pronouncements concerning those things which each man has a right – merely because God has created him a man – to demand of you, that is, to which he has a claim because he is a man. Hence every infringement of a *mishpat* is a sin not only against man but, for this very reason, also a sin against God; for you mock God by denying to a man that which God has allotted to him.” (In Sicker, 92)

The measure of the community’s righteousness, then, can be found in the status and care of the poorest and most powerless. It is on their well-being, and on the righteousness of society, that God has judged and carried out divine blessings and punishments (Shabbat 139a). The significance of the pursuit of justice for the people of Israel becomes clear in the full verse of Deuteronomy (16:20): “Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may live, and inherit the land which the Lord your God gave you.”

The Hebrew Prophets:

Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Malachi, Jeremiah

Jewish history also demonstrates that God’s punishments for the failure of the community to uphold its covenantal responsibilities can be severe. Rabbinic tradition has it that the absence of fair judges led to the destruction of Jerusalem, and the passivity and silence in the face of oppression, or the failure to constructively criticize, led to the destruction of the second temple.

The Prophet Amos was one of the first to plead with the Jewish people to restore themselves to virtue. In the 8th century BCE, during times of great political successes and prosperity, shocking extremes of wealth and poverty had manifest after fairly egalitarian beginnings. Wealth had inured some to the plight of the poor (Amos 6-1-7), and courts were no longer a refuge for justice (Amos 5:10-15). The prophet Amos soon declared that as the rich “trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth” (2:7), God had

⁷ Sicker, Martin, *The Political culture of Judaism*

decreed that the northernmost part of the kingdom would be destroyed, and the people taken into exile (6:4-7; 7:11, 17), which soon came to pass.

Where in Judaism every act is in service to God, matters of individual worship are often irrevocably tied to ethics and social justice. Leviticus (5:21), for example, exemplifies the unity of the religious to the ethical in stating that “If a person will sin and commit a treachery against God by lying to his fellow...” and “no one deals falsely with his fellow unless he repudiates the cardinal principle [of the existence of God].”

Most powerfully and dramatically of all, the Hebrew Prophets throughout history have proclaimed that authentic worship of God cannot coexist with the perpetration of injustice or unethical treatment of others. Rejecting the pretence or show of piety while the powerless suffered, God in Isaiah (1:11-15) asks: “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?”

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation - I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

Isaiah is commanded by God to “Cry aloud, spare not, lift up your voice like a trumpet, and declare unto My people their transgression” (Isaiah 58:1). Isaiah challenges the Jewish people to consider emptiness of their outward observance of worship while the purpose of worship is lost:

Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the chains of wickedness, to undo the bonds of oppression, to let the crushed go free, and to break every yoke of tyranny?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

The Prophet Amos (5:21-24) echoed the sentiments of Isaiah in God’s revulsion at the hypocrisy and incongruity of acts of religious worship with the persistence of pervasive social injustice:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Moreover, the Prophets issued stark warnings about God's punishments for mistreatment of the poor. Amos (5:11-12) explicitly linked God's wrath with the treatment of the poor:

Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.

For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins - you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.

Jeremiah castigates the Jewish people for their failure to protect orphans and plead the cause of the poor (Jeremiah 5:28). He denounces an entire generation for having "in your skirts is found the blood of the souls of the innocent poor" (2:34), and the whole nation for "using oppression, robbing, defrauding the poor and the needy, and extorting from the stranger" (22:29) Isaiah (10:1-3) also declared that

... that the destruction from afar would befall Judah because of its mistreatment of the poor: Woe to those who decree iniquitous deeds... to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people to their right...

What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away?

To avert God's impending judgment, Isaiah implores his community to:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

The Prophet Micah (2:2) similarly denounced Israelites who "covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance." He warned that Jerusalem would soon become "a heap of ruins" – and for a time, his warnings were heard. The Prophet Malachi (2:11) pleaded: "Have we not all one Father? Hath not one God created us? Why, then, do we deal treacherously with one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?"

Jeremiah, a hundred years after Isaiah, once more condemned the oppression of the poor and the indifference of the wealthy to the needy and to orphans:

Wicked men are found among my people; they lurk like fowls lying in wait. They set a trap; they catch men. Like a basket full of birds, their houses are full of

treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek.

They know no bounds in deeds of wickedness; they judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things?" says the Lord, "and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?" (Jeremiah 5: 26-29)

Jeremiah laments the loss of righteousness at the heart of the bond between the Jewish community and God:

How the faithful city [Jerusalem] has become a harlot, she that was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross, your wine mixed with water... Every one loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them.

Therefore the Lord says, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: "Ah, I will vent my wrath on my enemies, and avenge myself on my foes. I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy.

And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city." (1: 21-26)

Amos (5:14-15) implores the Israelites to change their ways, linking ethical conduct to their very survival, and to the return to God's favor:

Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

God yearns for the reform of His people, promising them that

"If you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the stranger, the orphan, and the widow... then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors for ever." (Jeremiah 7:5-7)

SOCIAL OBLIGATIONS: CHARITY – TZEDAKAH

In Judaism, being a just community also means being a compassionate community. Rabbi Emanuel Rackman argues that "the greatest contribution of Judaism to the concept of benevolence "is that it grafted the notion of justice on the notion of charity. In the Bible one invariably finds the two words 'charity and justice' as a compound phrase – both words almost always appear together."⁸

Yet the Hebrew word for 'charity', "*Tzedakah*" is drawn from the root word *Tzadei-Dalet-Qof*, meaning righteousness, justice or fairness. The connotation is less about magnanimity or generosity of the privileged toward the underprivileged, but rather is a

matter of justice; the social obligation and responsibility to give the poor what is rightfully theirs.

In Judaism, poverty is viewed as exceedingly destructive to the human personality and negatively influences one's life experiences: "The ruin of the poor is their poverty" (Prov. 10:15). The Talmud notes that "The world is darkened for him who has to look to others for sustenance." (Betza 32a) Recognizing the damage done to individual esteem by poverty, the Talmud encourages actions that would prevent such a descent (Rashi on Leviticus 25:35) "be he stranger or settler", the homeless or neighbor (Lev. 25:35). These actions give force to the admonition of God that "you are to have no joy so long as a brother suffers by your side." (Horeb 17:126)

Sider notes that Hebrew words for the poor most commonly connote someone with low economic status that is "usually due to some calamity or some form of oppression."⁹ (Sider, 41) So great a tragedy is hunger that the Prophet Jeremiah stated: "Happier were the victims of the sword than the victims of hunger, who pined away, stricken by want of the yield of the field" (Lamentations 4:9)

Feeding the hungry (*Ha'akhalat Re'evim*) is a mitzvah, particularly as hunger drives people to make harmful decisions, and neglect spiritual needs and values: "The sufferings of poverty cause a person to disregard his own sense (of right) and that of his Maker." (Eruvim 41) The Talmud also states that "Where there is no sustenance, there is no learning." (Ethics of the Fathers 3:21) The implications for society are clear: the Talmud states that "The world will not be at peace before God until people are generous and provide food for the poor." (Eruvin 86a).

Not only does *tzedakah* help alleviate the conditions of social inequality, but it is also a strengthened and empathic commitment to the well-being of the community: "If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers... you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand. Open your hand generously and extend credit to him" (Deut. 15:7). Simon the Just famously observed that "Because of charity the world abides." (Pirkei Avot)

The Torah made a number of provisions to care for the community's poor: "The Levite must set aside a tenth of his tithes" (Numbers 18:26, Deuteronomy 18:4, Exodus 22:28), understood as meaning one-tenth of one's income after taxes to be set aside for the poor. *Tzedakah* includes giving aid, assistance, clothing, food, time and money to the poor, needy or to education institutions, hospitals or synagogues, and are not confined to the Jewish community alone. Jewish sources also describes the provision of temporary shelter as a means of *tzedakah*, as Isaiah cried out, "take the poor into your homes." Helping the homeless is thus a religious duty and act of righteousness that is preferable to God than observance of rituals or sacrifices (Prov. 21:3).

Specific Torah laws are designed to help alleviate the suffering of the poor: the corners of the field are to be left uncut for the poor to pick (Leviticus 19:9); the gleanings of the

⁹ For an examination of the distinctions of "poor" in Scripture (from sloth, calamity, exploitation and voluntary choice) see R.C. Sproul, "Who Are the Poor?" in *Tabletalk* 3.

wheat harvest and fallen fruit are to be left for the poor (Leviticus 19:10); during the sabbatical year, the land is to be left fallow so that the poor (as well as animals) may eat of whatever grows freely (Leviticus 25:2-7). Deuteronomy (24:19-22) states that

When you cut down your harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go again to fetch it; it shall be for the stranger, for the orphan, and for the widow; that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands... And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this thing.

The feeding of the needy and vulnerable is also found in Deuteronomy (19:28-29):

At the end of three years you shall bring forth all the tithe of your produce in that year, and shall lay it up inside your gates...and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are inside your gates, shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied; that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do.

As performing deeds of justice are considered by some the most important obligation of Jews (Deut. 16:20), it has even been argued that “*Tzedakah* is equal to all the other commandments combined.” (Bava Bathra 9b) Acts of righteousness, ethical practices and good deeds are forms of *tzedakah*, as is the belief and faith in God (Genesis 15:6), for which merit is given. Deuteronomy (6:2) adds that “It shall be *tzedakah* unto us if we take care...”, and the returning of a pledge “shall be a *tzedakah* unto you (Deut. 24:13). In Genesis (18:19) God declares, “For I know him that will command his children to do *tzedakah*”.

The command to perform charity is so central to Jewish worship, ethics and community that those who refrain from doing so are likened to idol-worshippers. Proverbs 14:31 states: “Anyone who withholds what is due to the poor blasphemes against the Maker of all, but one who is gracious unto the needy honors God.” The Talmud references a number of sanctions against those who fail to fulfill pledges of charity (including the death of a spouse, Succah 29b; Tos. Rosh HaShanah 6a; the visitation of drought, Taanit 8b), as well as rewards (such as the Redemption of Jerusalem through charity, Shabbat 139a; increasing one’s wealth, Taanit 8b-9a, Gittin 7a; overturning a divine judgment for death, Rosh HaShanah 16b, Proverbs 10:2; saving one from Hell, Gittin 7a).

So great is the spiritual value of acts of charity that the needy are believed to be doing the giver a favor by providing the opportunity for *tzedakah* (Vayikra Rabba 34:8. Cf Baba Batra I Oa-b; Zohar II:129a.), while recipients of charity are expected to perform *tzedakah* themselves (Gittin 7b). The Talmud teaches that “One who causes others [to give] is greater than one who simply gives” (Bava Batra 9a). It is also believed that performing *tzedakah* is one of three acts that can gain forgiveness for sins, along with *teshuvah* (repentance) and *tefilah* (prayer).

As early as the first century Rabbinic Judaism had established a “principal rule” that “no pious Jew could live in a community that had no organization for public charity.”¹⁰ This concept had become so developed by the twelfth century that the great scholar Maimonides once remarked that “Never have I seen or heard of a Jewish community that did not have a charity fund.” If a community had to choose between building a shelter for the poor and a synagogue, they are required to first build a shelter for the poor.

Widows, Orphans and Strangers

Those to whom alms are to be given include “the orphan, and the widow” (Deut. 26:12), as well as the poor, the wayfarer and converts. John F. Alexander noted that orphans, widows and strangers “each have about forty verses that command justice for them. God made it very clear that in a special sense he is the protector of these weak ones. Strangers are to be treated nearly the same as Jews, and woe to people who take advantage of orphans or widows.” (in “The Bible and the Other Side,” *The Other Side* 11, no. 5 (September-October 1975: 57; cited in Sider, 56)

God commands that foreigners be treated justly out of a sense of empathy, “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Deut. 22:21) But God takes particular exception to mistreatment of widows and orphans, as demonstrated by the pleadings of the Hebrew Prophets and Exodus (22: 22-24):

You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

Rabbi Emanuel Rackman points out that the Torah commands in at least 36 places the ethical treatment of the stranger in the Jewish community. Leviticus (19:33) states that “if a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not wrong him.” Jews are commanded not to wrong a stranger (Exod. 23:9), fellow man (including convert) (Leviticus 15:17), and are prohibited by three commandments not to oppress him or her (Exodus 22:20; 23:9 and 22:24).

Moreover, Torah states that one should do more than not oppress the stranger, but actually *love* him or her. Maimonides pointed out that this is supported by two Biblical commandments:

One because he is considered to be within the category of ‘*reyim*’ (a friend) and one because he is a stranger, and the Torah states “And you shall love the stranger...” The Holy One commanded that we should love the stranger just as He commanded that we should love Him, as it is written: And you shall love the Lord your God. The Holy One himself loves the stranger, as it is written: And He loves the stranger.” (Maimonides “The Laws of Behavior Chapter,” 6:4)

GEMILUT HASADIM – Acts of Loving Kindness and Good Deeds

¹⁰ Dalin, David. “Judaism’s War on Poverty,” in *Policy Review*, Sept/Oct. 1997. (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3647/is_199709/ai_n8769822)

The other Hebrew word for charity is *gemilut hasadim*, often translated as “loving kindness”. Whereas *tzedakah* is focused on monetary assistance and the poor, *Gemilut hasadim* is performed spontaneously out of a spirit of generosity and benevolence, given to both rich and poor, living and dead (Succah 49b), and is not confined to material assistance but involves a personal, sympathetic engagement with another’s suffering, with no minimum or maximum standard (Mishneh Peah 1:1). For these reasons, the Talmud considers *gemilut hasadim* as greater and more comprehensive in scope than *tzedakah* (Talmud Succah 49b).

Maimonides described the rabbinic commandments of *gemilut hasadim* as positive, proactive ones

... ordained by the rabbis, to visit the sick, to comfort mourners, to bury the dead, to provide for a bride, to accompany guests, to arrange for burial, to bear the bier on one's shoulder, to go before the coffin and to mourn, to dig the grave and to bury the dead. Also to gladden a bride and groom and to provide for all their needs.

... Although these are rabbinic commandments [i.e., commandments ordained by the rabbis], they are included in the Biblical commandment "You shall love your fellow person as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). Everything that you want others to do for you, do for anyone who is your brother [in that he is similarly obligated] by the Torah and the commandments." (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Mourners, chapter 14.)

This expression of compassion and love of one’s neighbor (Lev. 19:18) encapsulated by *gemilut hasadim* is found at the beginning of Torah (with God clothing Adam and Eve) and ends with generous behavior (God burying Moses). (Sotah 14a) Rashi points out that when the heart is engaged with the mind with a point of view of the well-being of another, compassion emerges from the relationship and the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” is fulfilled (Mishneh Torah, chapter 14).

The root word *g-m-l* suggests reciprocity and actions in the context of relationship. According to the Talmud, the reward for this kind of personal service is in the here and now, and not in the world to come (Shabbat 127a). God is mindful of these acts, as “Heaven grants compassion to those who give it, deny it to those that withhold it.” (Shabbat 151b) After all, as the Prophet Hosea declared 2,700 years ago: “For I desire kindness, not sacrifice; attachment to God rather than burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:6)

Personal involvement, attitude and effort are the determinative factor of the compassion and value of the *mitzvah*. The Babylonian Talmud states that “The reward for charity depends entirely upon the extent of the kindness in it.” (Sukkot 49b)

The Talmud states: “It does not say ‘happy is he who gives to the poor’, but ‘happy is he who considers the poor’.” (Psalms 41:2) (Yerushalmi, Peah 8:9; Vayikra Rabba 34: 1. Cf Midrash Tehilim 41:2f.) One Talmudic source equates acts of loving kindness to Jewish identity itself:

...if a person exhibits impudence, cruelty, or misanthropy, and does not perform acts of loving-kindness, one should strongly suspect that he is of non-Jewish descent; for Israel, the holy nation, has the three distinctive traits of 'modesty, mercy, and loving-kindness' (Yevamot 79a).¹¹

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel (Simon the Just) said, "On three things does the world stand on: justice, truth and peace, as the verse states: 'Truth and [judgments of] peace judge in your gates.'" (Zechariah 8:16). In Ethics of the Fathers, it is stated this way: "The world stands on three things: Torah, worship, and acts of loving kindness." (Pirke Avot 1:2)

God provides the ultimate model for compassion, and the Talmud abounds with ways in which to emulate God in acts of loving kindness. One Talmudic statement addresses this: "Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina taught: How can one 'walk in the ways of God' (as Deuteronomy 13:5 demands)? (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 14a). The response is that "as God clothes the naked... as God visits the sick... as God comforts mourners... as God attends the dead... as God attends brides and grooms... so you are to do also" (Sotah 14a; Sifre, Eikev, par. 49; Midrash Tehilim 25:10; Kohelet Rabba 7:6f ; Pirke deR. Eliezer, 12 and 16f; Avot deR. Nathan ch.4.) These acts of loving kindness are not only authentic forms of worship and promote a sense of community, but they also bring compassion to the pursuit of social justice.

Abraham also provides a paradigmatic model for compassion and acts of loving kindness in his overriding concern for the welfare and well-being of others. Abraham's compassion is demonstrated by his hospitality to strangers despite his own discomfort, his pleading with God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, as well as his test for a suitable daughter-in-law- one who would quench the thirst of his animals as well as his own.

The Talmud teaches the importance of other significant acts of *gamilut hasadim*, all of which can be found in the examples of God and the Patriarchs: "These are the deeds which yield immediate fruit and continue to yield fruit in the time to come: honoring parents, doing deeds of kindness, attending the house of study, visiting the sick..." (Shabbat 127a)

So important is the personal engagement with loving kindness, that the Talmud teaches that those who busy themselves with Torah only, "to the exclusion of *gemitut hasadim*, is as though he has no God." (Avodah Zara 17b)

The Talmud states that "Jews are compassionate children of compassionate parents," and that "one who is merciless toward his fellow creatures is no descendant of our father Abraham." (Bezah 32b) In a similar way, Rabbi David Rosen writes that "to be authentically Jewish means to emulate Abraham's compassionate conduct toward others." (Schwartz, xiii) Maimonides remarked that "The purpose of the laws of the Torah is to promote compassion, loving-kindness and peace in the world." (Maimonides, Yad Hazakam, Chilchot Shabbat 2:3)

¹¹ Alternative citation: Maimonides, HilchotIssurei Bi'ah 19:17, and MatnotAniyim 10:2. Cf Betza 32b.

DIGNITY OF THE POOR

Maimonides established eight degrees of *tzedakah* and ranked them in order of superiority. The lowest level of *tzedekah* involved the begrudging giving of charity for others, while the highest degree “is one who upholds the hand of a Jew reduced to poverty by handing him a gift or a loan, or entering into a partnership with him, or finding work for him, in order to strengthen his hand, so that he will have no need to beg from other people.” (Maimonides, Mishnah Torah, “Laws Concerning Gifts to the Poor”, 7:7).¹²

The development of interest-free loans to the poor was an act of *gemilut hasadim* (and over time became synonymous with free loans, at least colloquially), in part because it is viewed as a way of preventing the fall into poverty, thus preserving the dignity and esteem of the borrower. Deuteronomy 15:9 deals strictly with those who withhold loans from the poor, and Exodus (22:24) warns that “If you lend money to My People, to the poor man among you, do not behave like a creditor to him.” Proverbs (22:22) similarly warns “Do not rob the impoverished because he is impoverished.” The Talmud teaches that “It is better to lend to a poor person than to give him alms, and best of all is to provide him with capital for business.” (Shabbat 63a) Moreover, the Talmud observes there are blessings for those who forgive debts (Ketuvot 19a).

The emphasis on promoting self-sufficiency and anonymous giving¹³ in Jewish teaching not only instills a charitable social ethic, but also demonstrates a sensitivity to the dignity and feelings of those in need, and the importance of self-respect and self-confidence (Avot deR. Nathan, ch. 41. Cf. Tossefta, Peah 4:12; Yerushalmi, Peah 8:9; Vayikra Rabba 34:1). The Bible decrees that the merit and value of charitable acts can be nullified by insensitivity, and warns that when performing charity “their heart shall not be grieved when you give it to them.” (Deut. 15:10)

The emphasis in charity invokes the concern for the humanity of the poor, apart from his or her immediate financial circumstances. In the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Yannai remarked to a man who had publicly given money to a beggar that “It would have been better for you not to give him money than to give him money and embarrass him” (Hagigah 5a). Talmudic traditions affirm the importance of a “cheerful countenance” in giving to the poor, and if unable to give, it would still be as if “all the good gifts in the world had been given.” (Avot de Rabbi Nathan, ch. 13. Cf. Bava Batra 9b). Maimonides enjoins giving to the needy

... with a pleasant expression and happily, while commiserating with the needy person about his suffering... If a needy person asks for money and one has nothing to give him, one should make him feel better by speaking nicely with him. (Mishneh Torah, “Laws of Gifts to the Poor”, 10:4f)

¹² From lowest to highest, Maimonides ranked the levels of *tzedakah*: level eight, giving grudgingly with a sour countenance. Level seven, giving less than you can afford, but doing so pleasantly. Level six, giving generously, but only after being asked. Level five, giving before you are asked. Level four, the recipient knows the giver, but the giver does not know the recipient. Level three, the giver knows the recipient, but the recipient does not know the giver. Level two, giving anonymously, where neither giver nor recipient knows the other. Level one, helping someone become self-sufficient.

¹³ The Talmud teaches that “Whoever gives in secret is greater than Moses.” (Bava Bathra).

Speaking kindly to the poor (charity through speech) is praised by other sources as meriting God's blessing (Yereim, par. 48. Cf Tossefta, Peah 4:17; Sifre, Re'ey, par. 117; R. Jonah, Shaarei Teshuvah, 3:54; Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 97:1). The Talmud relates that one who gives a *prutah* (small coin) to a poor person is blessed with six blessings, but one who consoles a poor person is blessed with eleven blessings (Baba Bathra 9b). Proverbs (17:5) states that "one who mocks the poor blasphemes one's Maker." Conversely, Proverbs (19:17) states that "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord."

It is also found in Rabbinic teaching that repudiation of *gemilut hasadim* is the equivalent to a repudiation of the preeminent doctrine of God's existence (Kohelet Rabba 7:4. Cf Tossefta, Peah 4:20; Sifre, Re'ey, par. 117; Yalkut Shimoni, 11:64.). This is because repudiating *gemilut hasadim* similarly repudiates both Torah (since it enjoins it) and the status of humanity in the world as rightful claimants of God's creation. It was taught: "Give to Him of that which is His own, for you and whatever is yours are His. Thus it is said by David: 'For everything is from You, and from Your own we have given You' (I Chronicles 29:14)(Avot 3:7.). This has been understood to mean that all wealth is God's bounty, and performing acts of *gemilut hasadim*, one is taking from God's bounty to give to those most in need of it (Shemot Rabba, 31:15; Midrash Tannaim on Deuteronomy 15:10.).

It is also commanded that wealth first be distributed to family ("Ignore not your flesh", Isaiah 58:7) and then in outward concentric circles to one's own city, then larger community. Lending to family or a colleague to keep them financially viable is considered as an act of loving kindness.

Concern for the dignity of the poor also reflected in the development of the Gemah, which is a repository of useful items from which people may borrow and return, without assuming any sense of shame for borrowing or needing. It is believed that the comingling of compassion and the pursuit of justice creates an ethical standard by which to treat others in the image of God. In this way, human beings have the greatest promise for individual and personal restoration.

Social Activism, Repairing the World: Tikkun Olam

From the tradition of engaging the community and the importance of compassionate loving kindness developed a distinctive Jewish understanding of social activism in "*tikkun olam*" (literally, world repair).

It has been told to you, O human being, what is good
And what the Lord requires of you:
Only to do justly, love *chesed* (mercy, kindness)
And walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)