

The Postmodern Piety of Rav Shagar (session 7) The Radical Act of Tzedakah

1. Rabbi Nahman's Stories, The Master of Prayer, 287-290

Meanwhile, there was a land that had great wealth. Everyone there was wealthy. This land, however, had very strange and unusual customs, since everything was dependent on wealth. Thus, a person's status and worth were determined solely on the basis of his wealth. One who had thousands or ten thousands in cash had a certain rank. The entire order of social rank was thus determined by the amount of that each one had. According to their constitution, the one with the most money was king.

The people there had banners. There was one banner that denoted a certain amount of money, and a certain rank associated with that banner... Rank was determined in the following manner: If a person had a certain amount of money, he was considered an ordinary human being. If he had less than this, then he would be considered a bird or a beast... Thus, the poorest among them were considered no better than birds or beasts, since money was the most important thing to them...

The people agreed that they wanted to establish the rank of stars and constellations. If a person had a certain agreed upon amount of wealth, he would be a star... Eventually, they also established the rank of "angel." This too depended on a person's wealth. Finally, they also agreed to confer the rank of "gods"... Once this had been established, they agreed that it was not fitting for them to remain in the atmosphere of this world. Moreover, it was not considered fitting for them to mix with other people of the world, since this would defile them... They therefore decided that they would search for the highest mountains in the world and live there... Guards were stationed far from the mountains so that no strangers would be allowed to approach them...

This, however, brought about great concern about murder and robbery. People would be very ready to kill and steal, since they could become gods with the stolen money...

They set up a system of services and sacrifices to their "gods." They would also offer human sacrifices. Many people would also voluntarily offer themselves as sacrifices to their "gods," believing that they would then become incorporated into them, and later be incarnated as wealthy man...

Their main thing in life was money. With money one could buy anything... According to their belief system, human existence was based on money. Wealth was therefore the focus of their belief... According to their religion, charity was a very great sin. They believed that if a person gave charity, it would diminish the influx of wealth that God had given them. The main goal was to have as much wealth as possible... It was therefore forbidden in the strongest terms to give charity.

2. Rabbi Nahman, Likutei Moharan, 23

As it is written (Exodus 20:3), "You shall have no other gods before My countenance." Now, those people who succumb to the desire for money and do not believe that the Holy One can provide man with a livelihood through an easy way, extend great effort in chasing after their sustenance. They eat their bread with sorrow, as in (Genesis 3:17), "with great sorrow you will eat,"—sorrow being melancholy. Such people are tied to the countenance of the Other Side, "other gods," darkness, the aspect of death, as is written (Lamentations 3:6), "He set me in darkness [as those long dead]." Of them it is said (Ezekiel 7:19), "... and their gold is as something impure." This corresponds to idolatry,

3. Rav Shagar, Shiurim al Likutei Moharan, vol. 1, 142

The modern individual does not find their refuge in God but rather in their money and possessions – a reality that is fitting for the Land of Wealth described by Rabbi Nahman. . . Money grants a person security and something firm to hold on to. It constitutes a replacement for grasping hold of God.

4. Rav Shagar. "Tzedakah ve-Tikkun Chevrati." Luchot ve-Shivrei Luchot. 346

The foundation of stubborn capitalism is the rule of cruel competition that has no boundaries – “man is wolf to man.” I versus I, ego versus ego. Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch explains the word cruel (achzar) as “completely estranged (ach zar)”: the one who is cruel relates to the other with complete estrangement, without any feelings of love, he is estranged from him. Estrangement and alienation are the source of cruelty, and this estrangement is the foundational principle of capitalism.

5. Bava Batra 10b

One who says: I am contributing this coin to charity so that my sons will live, or if he says: I am performing the mitzvah so that I will merit a share in the World-to-Come, this person is a full-fledged righteous person.

6. Rav Shagar. "Tzedakah ve-Tikkun Chevrati." Luchot ve-Shivrei Luchot. 346

Tzedakah is an act of self-overcoming, and in actuality, an overcoming of one's individuality as Rabbi Nahman says in this Torah: “This is the essence of the avodah of tzedakah, for one who is compassionate by nature and gives tzedakah because he feels compassionate is not an avodah. There are wild animals that are compassionate by their nature, rather the essence of the avodah is to shatter the cruelty and turn it into compassion.

7. Rabbi Nahman, Likkutei Moharan Tinyana 4

Initially, when a person begins donating charity, he has to break his heartlessness and turn it into compassion. This is the essential devotion of charity. When someone naturally compassionate gives charity purely out of his compassionate instinct, it is not an act of devotion—there are <also animals> that are compassionate by nature. Rather, the essential devotion is transforming cruelty into compassion...

Beginning the devotion of charity is very difficult and demanding. All devotions and all acts of repentance—whatever act one wants to carry out in service of God—must be preceded by many cries of “Oy vavoy!” and many groans, genuflections and gesticulations {i.e., the contortions which the God-fearing make during their devotions}. This is mainly at the beginning, for it is very difficult then, because all beginnings are difficult (Mekhilta: Bachodesh 2). One needs many cries and sighs, etc., before <giving birth to any act>... Before the birth, how many times does a woman cry out, how many labor-pangs and contractions does she have until she bears the progeny! This is especially so for a first-time birth, because a woman's first delivery is very difficult for her, as it is written, “in anguish, like she that gives birth for the first time” ([Jeremiah 4:31](#)). This is a beginning, <which is very difficult, as in,> “all beginnings are difficult.”

And charity is always a beginning, as in ([Deuteronomy 15:8](#)), “open, you shall open [your hand to him].” Even where an opening and a beginning already exist, charity opens more and more, widening the opening further. When a person wants to embark upon a particular path and devotion in worshipping God, he needs to make an opening in order to enter that path. This is as in “all beginnings are difficult,” because at the beginning one must break through and open a new entrance. It is therefore very difficult. Yet the remarkable power of charity is that it can widen and open the opening more and more. When we make an opening in some devotion and give charity, the charity opens and widens the opening more and more. This is because charity is the beginning of all beginnings, for it opens and widens all the entrances.