

Unit 6: Charity

A Hasid in Medieval Garb Piety and Popular Religion in Ashkenaz and Beyond



Dr. Rachel Furst
Drisha, Spring 2023

Sefer Hasidim (Parma), no. 1345

If the Holy One gives wealth to the rich man and he does not give to the poor, then he gives to one what could have provided for a hundred, and the poor come and cry out before the Holy One, “You gave to him what could have provided for a thousand and he provided me no benefit.” And God makes a calculation with the rich man as if he had robbed many and says to him, “I gave you wealth so that you could give according to your financial means to the poor and you did not give, so I will take back from you as if you had committed robbery and as if you abused my deposit because I put wealth into your hands so that you could distribute it to the poor and you appropriated the wealth for yourself.”

ספר חסידים (פרמא), ס' תתקמ"ה

מי שהקב"ה מספיק ונותן לעשיר עושר והוא אינו נותן לעניים הרי נותן לאחד שהיו יוכלים מאה לפרנס באים העניים וצועקים לפני הקב"ה לזה נתתה מה שהיה יכול לפרנס אלף ולא עשה עמי טובה ונפרע מן העשיר כאילו גזל עניים רבים שאומרים לו הספקתי לך עושר כדי שתתן כפי השגת ידך עושרך לעניים ולא נתת אפרע ממך כאילו גזלתם וכאילו כפרת בפקדון שלי כי על כן נתתי בידך העושר לחלק לעניים ולקחת העושר לעצמך.

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Appraisals 8:13

One should never dedicate or consecrate all of his possessions. He who does so acts contrary to the intention of Scripture.... Such an act is not piety but folly, since he forfeits all his wealth and will become dependent on other people, who may show no pity towards him. Of such, and those like him, the rabbis have said, (Psalms 112:15) "The pious fool is one of those who cause the world to perish." Rather, one who wishes to spend his money on good deeds should spend no more than one-fifth, so that he may be, as the prophets commanded, "One who orders his affairs rightly," whether in matters of Torah or in the affairs of the world.

רמב"ם, משנה תורה, הלכות ערכין וחרמין ח:יג

לעולם לא יקדיש אדם ולא יחרים כל נכסיו, והעושה כן עובר על דעת הכתוב שהרי הוא אומר מכל אשר לו ולא כל אשר לו כמו שבארו חכמים, ואין זו חסידות אלא שטות שהרי הוא מאבד כל ממונו ויצטרך לבריות, ואין מרחמין עליו, ובזה וכיוצא בו אמרו חכמים חסיד שוטה מכלל מבלי עולם, אלא כל המפזר ממונו במצות אל יפזר יותר מחומש, ויהיה כמו שצוו נביאים מכלכל דבריו במשפט בין בדברי תורה בין בדברי עולם, אפילו בקרבנות שאדם חייב בהן הרי חסה תורה על הממון ואמרה שיביא כפי מסת ידו, קל וחומר לדברים שלא נתחייב בהן אלא מחמת נדרו שלא ינדור אלא כראוי לו שנאמר איש כמתנת ידו כברכת ה' אלהיך אשר נתן לך.

Since Christianity's earliest days, then, individual ownership rights were severely circumscribed. By making ownership of property conditional upon its proper use—that is, for meeting one's basic needs—the Church Fathers raised the possibility that improper use would cause the forfeiture of one's claim to his own property. Property, inasmuch as it exists at all, exists not as dominion but as *license of use*; if property is misused, the ownership is invalidated, and the property can, in theory at least, be confiscated in order to put it to better use. It follows from this that the unlimited accumulation of property is considered wrongful: One who has more than he needs has too much. Individual wealth is an affront to the principle of the equality of mankind, and an affront to God himself, who in his mercy granted man permission to possess property solely on condition that it be used appropriately...

Excess property, or property possessed by one who does not need it yet refuses to give it to the poor, is judged by Augustine to be improperly used. Augustine's teacher Ambrose, one of the fourth century's eminent Church Fathers, went so far as to say, "It is no less a crime to take from him that has, than to refuse to succor the needy..."⁸ By drawing a legal equivalence between refusing to give charity and stealing, Ambrose further circumscribed the boundaries of private ownership, not only condemning the accumulation of excessive wealth, but also granting legitimacy to the poor who would steal from those rich who refuse to give of their wealth freely. In effect, the Church made the forcible appropriation of an individual's property on behalf of the poor a legitimate act.

Joseph Isaac Lifshitz, "Foundations of a Jewish Economic Theory," *Azure* no. 18 (2004)

Judaism's affirmation of wealth becomes even more striking when one considers its attitude towards poverty. As opposed to the classical Christian view, nowhere in Judaism is poverty associated with righteousness. In the rabbinic teachings poverty is first of all considered a form of pointless suffering. "There is nothing worse than poverty," we find in Exodus Rabba. "One who must weigh every penny—it is as though he bears all the suffering of the world upon his shoulders, and as though all the curses from Deuteronomy have descended upon him."⁴¹ For this reason, Jewish law calls upon man to do everything in his power to avoid becoming dependent on his community for his welfare. As Rabbi Akiva taught his son: "It is better to profane your Sabbath than to become dependent on others."⁴² From his perspective, man is never excused from taking responsibility for himself, and is never allowed to make himself a burden on others.

Joseph Isaac Lifshitz, "Foundations of a Jewish Economic Theory," *Azure* no. 18 (2004)

Sefer Hasidim (Parma), no. 840

'Better is a handful with quietness'—that a man gives to God-fearing (*yir'ei shamayim*) poor who have lost their money—'than both the hands full with travail' (Eccl. 4:6)—who gives to the poor who are not decent (*einam mehugganim*). Yea, it is viewed as a sin, for what he gives to the corrupt ones (*peritsim*) they will spend on whores or gluttony, and he raises up (i.e. sustains) those who rebel in this world against God.

ספר חסידים (פרמא), ס' תת"מ

טוב מלא כף נחת שאדם נותן ליראי שמים עניים שירדו מנכסיהם ממלא חפנים עמל שנותן לעניים שאינם מהוגנים ולא עוד אלא שנחשב לו עון כי מה שיתנו לפריצים יתנו לזונות או בבליעות ומקיים מורדים להקב"ה בעולם.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Batra 9b

R. Isaac further said: What is the meaning of the verse, *He that followeth after righteousness and mercy findeth life, righteousness and honor?* (Prov. 21:21) Because a man has followed after righteousness (i.e. charity), shall he find righteousness (i.e. charity)? The purpose of the verse, however, is to teach us that if a man is anxious to give charity, the Holy One, blessed be He, furnishes him money with which to give it. R. Nahman b. Isaac says: The Holy One, blessed be He, sends him men who are fitting recipients of charity, so that he may be rewarded for assisting them. Who then are unfit? Such as those mentioned in the exposition of Rabbah, when he said: What is the meaning of the verse, *Let them be made to stumble before thee; in the time of thine anger deal thou with them* (Jer. 18:23)? Jeremiah said to the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe, even at the time when they conquer their evil inclination and seek to do charity before Thee, cause them to stumble through men who are not fitting recipients, so that they should receive no reward for assisting them.

תלמוד בבלי, מסכת בבא בתרא, ט' עמ' ב'

ואמר רבי יצחק, מאי דכתיב: רודף צדקה וחסד ימצא חיים צדקה וכבוד? משום דרודף צדקה ימצא צדקה? אלא לומר לך: כל הרודף אחר צדקה - הקדוש ברוך הוא ממציא לו מעות ועושה בהן צדקה. רב נחמן בר יצחק אמר: הקדוש ברוך הוא ממציא לו בני אדם המהוגנים לעשות להן צדקה, כדי לקבל עליהם שכרו. לאפוקי מאי? לאפוקי מדדרש רבה; דדרש רבה, מאי דכתיב: ויהיו מוכשלים לפניך בעת אפך עשה בהם? אמר ירמיה לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא: רבוננו של עולם, [אפילו] בשעה שכופין את יצרן ומבקשין לעשות צדקה לפניך, הכשילם בבני אדם שאינן מהוגנין, כדי שלא יקבלו עליהן שכר.

Sefer Hasidim (Parma), no. 1705

And whence do you learn that he is duty-bound to sustain [the poor man] even four or five times (i.e. even if this is the fourth or fifth time that he has fallen on the dole)? Learn it from (Lev. 25:35) ‘help him’ (i.e. an unqualified imperative that applies in all cases). One might think that this is so even if he is *mafsido le-tarbut ra’ah*—learn from ‘with thee’ (i.e. lives as you do, that is to say, conducts himself properly). **Even if he (the poor man) is his father, if he gives him [charity], he aids sinners in achieving their ends. Even if the father spends the charity money on food, that [simply enables him] to spend the money coming from other sources on bad ways.**

Leviticus 25:35 (JPS translation)

If your kinsman, being in straits, comes under your authority, and you hold him as though a resident alien, let him live by your side.

ספר חסידים (פרמא), ס' תתתק"ה

ומניין שאם החזקת בו אפילו ארבע וחמש פעמים חזור והחזק בו ת"ל והחזקת יכול אפילו מפסידו לתרבות רעה ת"ל עמך ואפילו אם הוא אביו אם נותן לו מסייע לעוברי עבירה הוא לפי שהוא גורם ואפילו אם נותן לו לאכול ומצד אחר באים לו מעות שהוא נותן לתרבות רעה.

ויקרא כה:לה

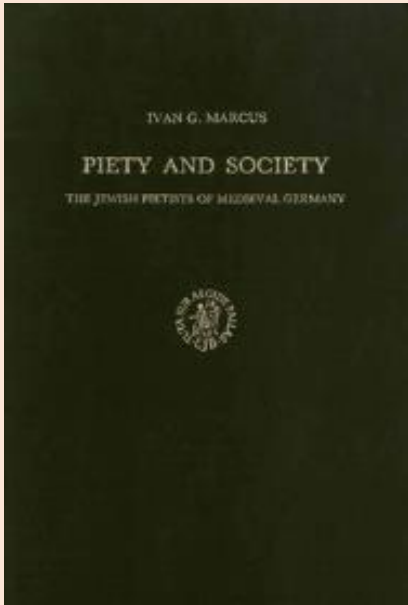
וכי-ימוך אֲחִיךָ, וּמָטָה יָדוֹ עִמָּךָ--וְהִחֲזַקְתָּ בּוֹ, גֵר וְתוֹשֵׁב וְחֵי עִמָּךְ.

Sefer Hasidim (Parma), no. 857

A righteous man (*tsaddik*) is in need of charity and a wicked man (*rasha*), 'a wastrel and a drunkard' (Deut. 21:20), stands [before you to receive charity], and you can only give to one of them, and the *rasha* says that if you do not give him [the money], he will convert to Christianity or commit another offence, but not that of murder—give to the *tsaddik* and let the *rasha* go to Hell. However, if he is about to commit murder, give him [the money] as ransom for the innocent man, so that he will not be killed.

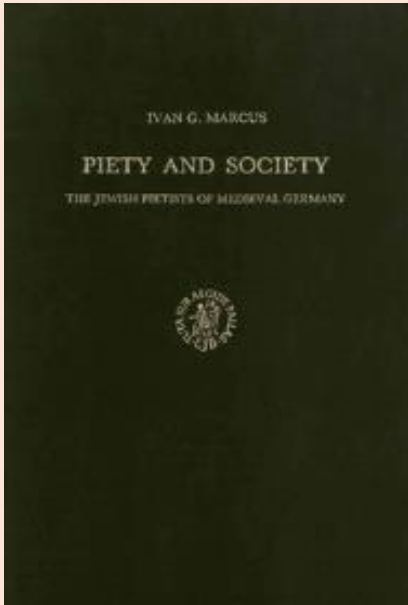
ספר חסידים (פרמא), ס' תתנ"ז

אדם צדיק וצריך לצדקה שתתן לו ואם רשע זולל וסובא עומד ואינך יכול לתת אלא לאחד מהם והנה הרשע אומר אם לא תתן לו ישתמד או יעשה עבירה אחרת ולא רציחה תן לצדיק והרשע ילך לגיהנם אבל אם בא לעשות רציחה כדי לפדות הנקי שלא יהא נרצח תן לו.



Giving charity [*zedaqah*] is still another religious obligation which Judah interpreted and applied in a sectarian fashion, despite the risk of creating tensions with non-Pietist acquaintances and even family. By indicating how a Pietist should give, *Sefer Hasidim* reveals the author's exclusivistic scale of values... Moreover, giving money to a non-Pietist is a sin; not giving charity to a non-Pietist is itself an act of pietism. One should go to great lengths, even leaving town, to avoid supporting non-Pietists including one's own father. Unless a non-Pietist threatened to murder someone if a Pietist does not give him charity, a Pietist must not yield to threats to commit a sin. Even if he should threaten to apostatize, the Pietist is to resist helping a non-Pietist: "Let the non-Pietist go to Hell."

Ivan Marcus, *Piety and Society*, p. 101-102

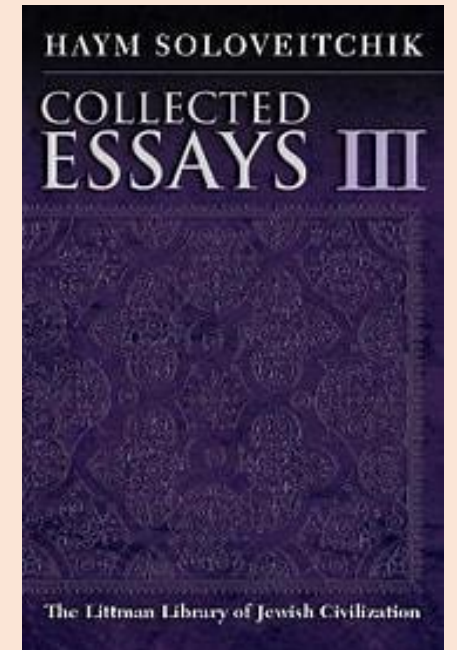


Giving charity [*zedaqqah*] is still another religious obligation which Judah interpreted and applied in a sectarian fashion, despite the risk of creating tensions with non-Pietist acquaintances and even family. By indicating how a Pietist should give, *Sefer Hasidim* reveals the author's exclusivistic scale of values... Moreover, giving money to a non-Pietist is a sin; not giving charity to a non-Pietist is itself an act of pietism. One should go to great lengths, even leaving town, to avoid supporting non-Pietists including one's own father. Unless a non-Pietist threatened to murder someone if a Pietist does not give him charity, a Pietist must not yield to threats to commit a sin. Even if he should threaten to apostatize, the Pietist is to resist helping a non-Pietist: "Let the non-Pietist go to Hell."

Ivan Marcus, *Piety and Society*, p. 101-102

As context alone tells us the meaning of certain words, meaning is then a conclusion that we draw from the text, and drawing conclusions from the text of so aggregated and heterogeneous a work as *Sefer Hasidim* is no simple matter... Terminology was never a hasidic strong point, and, not surprisingly, they never coined terms which firmly distinguished between 'pious' and 'Pietist'. Their bent of mind did not tend to fixed terms, and they never gave themselves a fixed name, as did, for example, the Polish hasidim or the Sabbatians. *Tsaddikim*, *tovim*, *mehugganim*, *yir'ei ha-Shem* were all used interchangeably. They added new content to these old words, but did not and could not remove their old contents. The result: they called themselves by a host of shifting names, and they called all other ordinary, law-abiding Jews by the same names. The terminological ambiguity is ours to resolve.

Haym Soloveitchik, *Collected Essays III*, p. 182, 196



Sefer Hasidim (Bologna), no. 1050

One who squats in his neighbor's house without his knowledge and there are extra houses or rooms there; and the owner does not need them for any reason; and a good person will be squatting in them; and it is [like the talmudic principle] *zeh neheneh v'zeh lo haser*; and he does not need to rent it out to others; and he can welcome a good poor person there, he may not collect rent since he is not suffering harm or any loss—it will be a merit for him. And so too, the tribe of Judah welcomed the tribe of Shimon to reside in their cities until Saul reigned, needed the land, and removed them—but before that, [the tribe of Simeon] did not give [the tribe of Judah] anything [in return for allowing them to squat].

ספר חסידים (בולוניה), ס' תתר"נ

הדר בחצר חבירו שלא מדעתו ויש בתים וחדרים שם ואין צריך להם לשום דבר כגון שהם ריקים ואין דרים שם ואיש טוב דר בהם זה נהנה וזה אינו חסר שאינו צריך מהם להשכיר לאחרים להיות שם אם מקבל איש עני וטוב שם לא יתכן שיקח ממנו שכר כיון שאינו מזיקו ואינו מחסרו ויהיה לו זכות. וכן שבט יהודה קבלו שבט שמעון לשבת בעריהם עד שמלך דוד והוצרכו לארץ והוציאום וקודם לכך לא נתנו להם כלום.