

**Gold Coin Australia**  
**A Social Justice initiative**  
**Rabbi Gary J Robuck**  
**Sivan/June 2024**

## Rationale



In our nation's capital, and in cities large and small around the world, there are those living hard, sleeping on sidewalks, lining up for food relief and weaving through cars idling at busy intersections offering to clean motorists' windcreens. Increasingly, however, those to whom they appeal for some measure of help are without the means to do so for they carry no cash with them.

Increasingly, societies are becoming cashless. What was thought to be an inevitability only in future generations, has come along much faster, in part, due to Covid-19.

*Sweden, the first European country to introduce banknotes in 1661, became the world's first cashless society on 24 March 2023. Finland and the UK are top ranked to become cashless societies as well.*

*In the Asia-Pacific region, Australia, China, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Korea and Singapore are identified as frontrunners in digital payments. Card payments made up the bulk of consumer payments in Australia in 2022 whilst cash payments decreased to 13 per cent from 69 per cent in 2007. Already, some banks have scrapped over-the-counter cash transactions in some branches.<sup>1</sup>*

## The Effect on the Recipient

The harm that is caused to those who rely upon our kindness but do not receive it, no matter how our hearts may be inclined, is obvious. Good intentions do not fill the belly. Instead, more go to sleep hungry, or hopeless, or cold. Clearly, homelessness and hunger are not remedied by a small, spontaneous act of generosity. They are, however, momentarily relieved. Giving a gold coin, or a \$5.00 note, a blessing or sharing a kind word, help to raise the eyes and lift the spirit of one doing it tough and can contribute to preserving the dignity of an individual created like us, in the image of God. It is also owed to the poor.

## The Effect on the Giver

*Tevye walks by the town beggar and hands him a kopek. "One kopek?" says the beggar. "Last week you gave me two kopeks." "I am sorry," says Tevye, "I had a bad week." "So," says the beggar, "if you had a bad week, why should I suffer?"<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Queensland Government document, last updated 17 April 2024

<sup>2</sup> Harnock and Bock, book by Joseph Stein

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, distinguishes between charity, regarded as a laudable though a voluntary act, and the Biblical imperative of giving tzedakah, taught: "What would be regarded as charity in other legal systems is, in Judaism, a strict requirement of the law."

Jewish Tradition is emphatic that giving Tzedakah is obligatory, but it also benefits the giver as well as the one who receives.

*Judaism teaches the belief that donors benefit from tzedakah as much or more than the poor recipients...Whereas the poor receive money or other material assistance, the donor receives the merit of sharing the Almighty's work.*<sup>3</sup>

And not only that. If character is created through one's habits and behaviour, the regular turning aside from the appeals issuing from those needing our help, threaten to coarsen us and to impact the empathy we feel towards others generally. Conversely, giving tzedakah when asked, draws us closer to those like us, created in God's image.

Becoming a *masmid bi'tzedakah* - giving regularly if not somewhat less each time, can result, like regular weight training, in the strengthening of muscle, in this case, the compassion muscle.

*"Good character traits do not come to a person by virtue of the greatness of a deed, but rather by the frequency with which he performs it. To acquire good character traits, one must perform good deeds again and again."*<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, in an article found on JewishUnpacked.org, psychologist Tara Brach notes, "When we consistently practice new actions we can actually rewire the structure and the function of our brain."<sup>5</sup>

### **In What Spirit does one Give?**

The Rambam (Maimonides) articulates what I regard as emblematic of the Jewish spirit. Though best known for his so-called, Ladder of Tzedakah<sup>6</sup> that preaches self-sufficiency as tzedakah's goal, he also emphasises how important it is to bring kindness and compassion to one's tzedakah work.

*Whoever gives tzedakah to the poor with a sour expression and in a surly manner, even if he gives a thousand gold pieces, loses his merit. One should instead give cheerfully and joyfully, and empathize with him in his sorrow as it is said, (Job 30:25) "Did I not cry for him whose day is difficult? Did my soul not grieve for the poor?" Speak to him with compassion and comfort as it is said (Job 29:13) "And I gladden the heart of the widow.""*  
(Laws of Gifts to the Poor, Ch.10)

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<sup>3</sup> Jacquelyn DeGroot, learningtogive.org

<sup>4</sup> Rambam, based upon Pirkei Avot, 3:15

<sup>5</sup> The Ultimate guide to the Jewish value of Tzedakah

<sup>6</sup> See the excellent article from My Jewish Learning with interpretation and translation by Dr. Meir Tamari

## What does the Torah and Tradition say?

The Torah, though when referring to the plight of one's fellow Jew, makes plain that giving to those in need is an obligation, a *mitzvah*. In Leviticus 25:35 it is written: "If your brother sinks in poverty, then you shall strengthen him." Likewise, in Deuteronomy 15, the people are enjoined: "Do not harden your heart or shut your hand against your needy brother." Famously, Deuteronomy 16:20 implores us to occupy ourselves with justice as it is written: "Justice, justice, shall you pursue."

Later, the Prophets equate justice with the material well-being of a society and severely and unremittingly criticise the people for neglecting or exploiting the poor. Ezekiel implied that Sodom was destroyed because of its people's meanness.<sup>7</sup> In the Talmud, Rabbi Joshua ben Korcha stated: "Anyone who shuts his eyes from the obligation of *tzedakah* is like one who worships idols."

Mark Zboroski and Elizabeth Herzog in their work, *Life is with People*, explain that giving Tzedakah is ingrained in a Jewish child early and expected of that child throughout life.

*"Life in the shtetl [the small villages of Eastern Europe] begins and ends with tzedaka. When a child is born, the father pledges a certain amount of money for distribution to the poor. At a funeral the mourners distribute coins to the beggars who swarm the cemetery, chanting, 'Tzedaka saves from death.' At every turn during one's life, the reminder to give is present.... If something good or bad happens, one puts a coin into a box. Before lighting the Sabbath candles, the housewife drops a coin into one of the boxes.... Children are trained to the habit of giving. A father will have his son give alms to the beggar instead of handing them over directly. A child is very often put in charge of the weekly dole at home, when beggars make their customary rounds. The gesture of giving becomes almost a reflex".*

Today, *Tikkun Olam* (the world's repair), is a key Jewish value that inspires many to show responsibility for our Jewish community and also to give generously and often to whomever may require our help and in the process change the world - if only a little bit at a time.

### For your community:

1. Coordinate a campaign to encourage your members and friends to carry cash in their purses and wallets and to be alert to the needs of those begging for our help.
2. Create marketing material to promote the campaign locally.
3. Initiate discussions and establish partnerships with local government and other faith organisations to consider changes to public policy.
4. Speak with your Rabbi about providing an intergenerational program of study on the subject of Tzedakah in Jewish law and tradition.
5. Register mitzvah heroes and create an "accounting system" to gauge the impact of your program.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ezekiel 16:49, "Behold this was the sin of your sister, Sodom, etc.; she did not support the poor and the needy."