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Tzedakah – Our Ticket Out of Mitzrayim

Bread of Poverty

In his commentary on the Haggadah, the Chida explains **הא לחמא עניא** (the opening paragraph of *Maggid*) by connecting it with a description in *Tana D'vei Eliyahu*:

The generation that left Mitzrayim had one mitzvah in their hands that was much more pleasing to Hakadosh Baruch Hu than many of our mitzvos. And what was that mitzvah? They gathered together and sat as one group, and made a covenant to do *chesed* with each other.

The Chida explains the significance of this covenant by referring us to Rabbeinu Bachye, who explains that Am Yisrael were so oppressed in Egypt because they were stingy and ignored the poor rather than helping them. When they committed themselves to *gemilus chasadim*, they repaired that damage, and in the merit of *gemilus chasadim* they left Mitzrayim.

The Chida explains that in our generation as well, someone who is miserly becomes subjugated to the *kelipah* (spiritual evil) of Mitzrayim and will become more and more entangled in his *aveiros*. On the other hand, one who commits himself to *gemilus chasadim*, and gives more *tzedakah* than usual will escape Mitzrayim, becoming free of his *aveiros*.

He then explains the text of **הא לחמא עניא** in light of this understanding. As many commentators point out, it's difficult to see a connection between "This is the bread of poverty that our ancestors ate in the land of Mitzrayim" and the next words, "Let all who are hungry come and eat." The Chida explains that that our ancestors 'ate the bread of poverty' as a punishment for being tight-fisted and ignoring the poor. They adopted this behavior 'in the land of Mitzrayim' – by imitating their oppressors.

Then, in the next sentence, we declare: Just as they changed their ways, we too will open our doors to the hungry. Just as they were then redeemed from Mitzrayim, we hope to celebrate Pesach next year in Yerushalayim – in the merit of *tzedakah*, for *tzedakah* hastens the *geulah*.

Galus and Geulah Are Relative

We know that the *geulah* will arrive when we redeem our own *neshamos*. If Chazal tell us that *tzedakah* hastens the *geulah*, it follows that *tzedakah* frees our *neshamos* from the prison of their *galus*. *Tana D'vei Eliyahu*, Rabbeinu Bachye and the Chida have taught us that the punishment of *galus* results from being miserly, *middah k'neged middah*. It was in Mitzrayim that we discovered that it is the nature of Hashem's world, but the truth of this correlation is not limited to *galus Mitzrayim*.

A person who is *tzar ayin* is in a state of *galus*, and the longer he continues to ignore the plight of the needy, the more his exile will progressively deepen, until he finds himself, like Bnei Yisrael, in Mitzrayim.

Picture a seventeen-year-old *bachur* who is amusing himself in a children's playground, jumping, swinging, and sliding. An observer calls out, "You're seventeen years old! You should be finding your enjoyment in learning. At the very least, if you are going to play, amuse yourself in a way that is appropriate to your age. What are you doing in the playground?"

The answer is somewhat obvious. If the young man finds his amusement in the playground, he must be stuck in a level of childishness. Nothing will be accomplished by criticizing him. The only way to help him is indirectly, with wisdom and thought, finding ways to help him mature.

Bnei Yisrael were in Mitzrayim because their *tzarus ayin* brought them down to the level of Mitzrayim. Each person's *neshamah* was self-centered, separated from the others and therefore from Hashem. Each Jewish *neshamah* is a חלק אלוך ממעל, 'a portion of the Divine from above.' When a Jew joins with other Jewish *neshamos* and makes a *bris* with them, he makes a covenant with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. With the

power of this covenant, he can escape from anything that is restricting him. That is how Bnei Yisrael left Mitzrayim, and that is how we can escape our *galuyos*, both individual and national.

How Much of a Jew Are You?

Rav Elya Roth often repeated something he had heard from the Chazon Ish:

וויפיל איד איז מען? וויפיל מ'טוהט פאר א צווייטן. - How much of a Jew are you? As much as you do for another.

This is a very deep statement that must be understood. *Chesed* is not only a good deed. It builds a person's inner Jew. It is also important to note that the *Tana D'vei Eliyahu* did not describe Jews in Mitzrayim building vast *chesed* organizations or making large donations. (That may or may not develop later.) The *bris* of *chesed* they made with each other was sufficient to connect their *neshamos*. Once that connection exists, *chesed* begins to flow naturally. How can someone sit at home when his fellow Jew is suffering? The commitment to the *bris* of *chesed* built the inner Jew inside each member of that covenant.

The Vizhnitzer *chassid* R' Mordechai Chuna Fuchs used to say, "When I began to go from place to place collecting money for the poor, I benefitted far more than the poor did. Later in my life, it provided great benefit to the poor, and less to me."

He explained, "When I began to collect, people insulted me and turned me away in shame. That made me a far better Jew. Unfortunately, the poor did not benefit much from my efforts. Later in my life, people honored me and gave me large donations for the poor. The poor benefitted more, but it did far less for my development as a Jew."

He referred to the scorn people heaped upon him in the early days, but that is only one detail that contributed to his growth. He became a better Jew because of his efforts to do *chesed* with his fellow Jews.

The scorn and insults were just additional blessings in disguise that helped purify him.

Chassidus Today

The Satmar Rav *zt"l* recalled that when he was nine years old, he overheard someone asking his father, the *Kedushas Yom Tov*, about the ways of *chassidus*. His father answered, "The primary *chassidus* in our days is to keep every detail written in the Shulchan Aruch with self-sacrifice, and to be *moser nefesh* to help other Jews, in person or with one's money."

In other words, the path of *chassidus* is for Yiddishkeit to permeate all levels of our being, so that both body and soul are invested in each of our mitzvos. If someone donates money or does a good deed, but his heart and soul aren't fully invested in it, the mitzvah does not transform him. Only when he forges a covenant, committing himself to do *chesed*, does he develop his inner Jew. Once that occurs, his entire inner world transforms for the better.

The founders of *chassidus* taught that a person should not be satisfied with keeping mitzvos externally; he should fulfill them in a way that will transform his inner world. He should learn Torah *lishmah*, daven in a way that changes him, and keep Shabbos in a way that awakens all his emotions. If someone makes a commitment to *chesed* with that approach, it will change his entire existence.

Prepare for the Seder

The Chida is teaching us that we cannot sit down at the *Seder* table and ask Hashem to free us from our Mitzrayim, if we have not first been *moser nefesh* to ensure that our fellow Jews have all that they need for Pesach. Without that *mesirus nefesh*, we are in the same situation that our ancestors were in before they were wise enough to join in a *bris* of *chesed*. We may daven, and keep Pesach will all of our *minhagim* and *chumros*, in the hope that these actions will release us from our personal and national constraints (*meitzarim*). However, that will not help, if internally we've placed ourselves in Mitzrayim.

What can we do? So long as a person has not invested his strength and funds into providing Jews with Pesach necessities, and has not tried to get others to contribute, he cannot get out of Mitzrayim. He has not joined the *bris of chesed*. A few weeks later, he hopes to receive the Torah on Shavuot; but in order to do so, he must first be a Yid, and a Yid is measured by what he does for his fellow Jews.

Tzedakah from the Heart

In his *sefer Divrei Yoel (Parshas Vayeshev)*, The Satmar Rav presents an important precept.

We have a general principle (first expressed by R. Moshe Ibn Ezra and Rabbeinu Tam), דברים היוצאים מן הלב נכנסים אל הלב - "Words that come from the heart enter the heart." This statement refers to דברים - things, rather than דיבורים - words. That is to say, if someone gives *tzedakah* wholeheartedly, others will learn from him and emulate him. On the other hand, someone whose heart is not in the giving, but only gives because he is forced to, will not move others to learn from him, because it doesn't come from the heart.

As we have learned, tzaddikim taught us that one of the goals of *gemilus chassadim* is to transform the donor into a true Jew. The Satmar Rav adds that the transformation is not limited to the *ba'al chesed* himself. If the *ba'al chesed's* actions come from the heart, others will learn from him and emulate him. He transforms the very air that surrounds him and influences everyone in his proximity. People may suddenly find themselves wanting to give *tzedakah*, without recognizing the source of the urge.

Someone who gives *tzedakah* unwillingly, or unenthusiastically, does not inspire that transformation. The *ba'al chesed*, whose wholehearted giving inspires others, embodies Chazal's statement, גדול המעשה יותר מן העושה - "One who causes others to do *chesed* is even greater than the one who does *chesed* himself."

Simchas Yom Tov

Rav Yehudah of Dzikov was zealous about the *halachah* of making *Kiddush* as soon as possible on the night of Yom Tov. On the first night of Sukkos, one year, he decided not to daven in his usual shul because they davened slowly. He davened in another shul where the pace was quicker, which would allow him to make *Kiddush* in the *sukkah* as soon as possible.

But one year, after *Ma'ariv* on the first night of Sukkos, he turned to one of his *talmidim* and said, "Do you know where we are going now? We are going to be *mekabel* Yom Tov.

"The Rambam writes that the primary *simchas Yom Tov* is bringing joy to widows and orphans. A family that lives nearby just suffered a tragedy on Erev Yom Tov. The mother, a young woman, suddenly passed away.

"Who really needs my *Kiddush*? Who needs my *Shehecheyanu*? Who needs my Sukkos? I have no reason to return home. The only reason I rejoice on Yom Tov is that the Torah says ושמחת בחגך; and the Rambam writes that we fulfill that mitzvah by bringing joy to widows and orphans."

The tzaddik went and sat with the husband and his children in their Sukkah for three hours. He spoke to each of them, strengthened and encouraged them, and sang *niggunim* of *simchah* with them. Only when they went to rest did he make his way home.

As he walked home, he remarked to the *talmid* who accompanied him: "One might say that we have already fulfilled the mitzvah of *simchas Yom Tov*."

Rejoice Before Hashem

There is a deep lesson in the above story. There is a reason that *simchah* was one of the foundations of the Torah of *Chassidus*. When a Yid serves Hashem with *simchah*, the inner portions of his *nefesh* reveal

themselves. When he fulfills mitzvos with *simchah*, he serves Hashem not just physically, but with his *nefesh* and *neshamah* as well. This is why Chazal stated that *ruach hakodesh* will only manifest itself through *simchah*. When a person is in a state of sadness (*atzvut*), the inner parts of his *nefesh* are locked in. The inability to reveal and express those parts of the *nefesh* brings sadness. When the locks are opened and a person's inner *nefesh* is revealed, that brings *simchah*.

When Hakadosh Baruch Hu gave us the mitzvah of *simchah* on Yom Tov, He wanted us to appear before Him and be with Him, just as our ancestors did when they would go three times each year to the Beis Hamikdash - 'to see and to be seen.' Hakadosh Baruch Hu tells each Jew, "If you spend the Yom Tov with a heavy heart and bitterness, focused only on measuring the *k'zayis* of matzah and *maror*, and yelling at everyone around you, you are not with Me."

Imagine a host who invites a guest to spend Yom Tov in his home. The guest tries to refuse politely, explaining that he is not comfortable staying at other people's homes; but the host persists, and he agrees to come.

To his dismay, throughout the entire Yom Tov, the host ignores him and spends most of his time in the kitchen yelling at his wife and kids. The guest asks himself, "Why in the world did he pressure me to come for Yom Tov? I thought he wanted to spend time with me and share the Yom Tov with me."

Hakadosh Baruch Hu wants to be with us on Yom Tov. That's why He gave us the mitzvah of rejoicing on Yom Tov. If we are *b'simchah*, we are truly present; if we aren't *b'simchah*, our true self is not celebrating the Yom Tov together with Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

If You Will Bring Joy to Mine...

The Rambam teaches us that even if a person enjoys a Yom Tov of lavish meals with family and friends, he is not really experiencing the *simchah* of spending Yom Tov with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. He may be rejoicing with fine cuts of meat, but it is not the *simchah* of celebrating Yom Tov with Hashem. It's the *simchah* of the belly.

If you rejoice because you know that another Jew has what he needs for Yom Tov, and you call out, כל דכפין ייתי ויכול - "Let all who are hungry come and eat," you have formed a bond with another Jew. That connection with another Yid is a connection to Hashem.

When a Yid suffers, the *Shechinah* suffers along with him. When a Jew sits in his home on Yom Tov, weighed down by debts, and by the sense that he has been forgotten by the community (which has not provided for his Yom Tov necessities), he is engulfed by sadness. Even if there are matzos on his table, he feels alone and forgotten.

"Everyone else has what they need to make festive Yom Tov meals, but when I begged the *gabbaim* of the *kimcha d'pische* fund for help, they just threw me a sack of potatoes. I realize that there wasn't enough money in the fund; but that's because the community did not contribute enough. Most people gave the same amounts as last year, but prices have shot up, and the number of people needing assistance has grown.

"I'm surrounded by people driving luxury cars, and I don't even have basic Yom Tov necessities!"

This sad state of affairs can be summed up in two words, *pirud levavos* - 'separation of hearts,' a world of Jews who don't feel connected to each other. There is no *bris*, no commitment to *chesed* that binds Jews together.

A person must understand that if he wants to be with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, he must forge that *bris* with Bnei Yisrael. Hakadosh Baruch Hu wants to be with him; but he must internalize the message that he cannot approach Yom Tov without the *bris* of *chesed*.

It's also important to remember that Hashem will reward those who are part of the *bris*, *middah k'neged middah* - in a manner that parallels their conduct. Just as *middah k'neged middah* applies to punishment, it applies to reward, but much more so. Chazal have taught us, מדה טובה מרובה - the *middah* of goodness is always far more abundant than its opposite. When someone feels the needs of his fellow Jews, worries

about them, and even suffers humiliation in his efforts to provide them with their needs – Hashem will truly be with him.

A Lesson from Miriam

The Torah commands us to remember what Hashem did to Miriam on our way out of Mitzrayim. Of course, the simple explanation is that we must remember the way Miriam was punished for speaking *lashon hara* about Moshe. However, the Rashbam provides another explanation.

Although Bnei Yisrael were fully invested in traveling (to Eretz Yisrael), they did not travel until Miriam was healed.

According to the Rashbam, what Hashem commands us to remember from this story is the way Hakadosh Baruch rewards people *middah k'neged middah*. Just as Miriam waited a brief time in her caring for Moshe when he floated in the Nile, the entire nation waited for seven days in honor of Miriam. Hakadosh Baruch Hu wants us to remember each day that the reward for kindness far exceeds whatever we may have invested.

Middah k'neged middah is not a 'quid pro quo' dynamic, like a transaction. It is much more direct. The very power of *chesed* that someone brought into existence showers him with *chesed*.

Suppose an upstairs neighbor bangs on the floor with a hammer, and the downstairs neighbor remarks to us, "It's strange: somehow, every time he bangs on the floor, a loud noise emanates from my ceiling!"

We would laugh. We all know that it's not a complex interplay of cause and effect; it's much more direct than that. He's hearing the sound waves that his neighbor's banging created.

Here as well, Hakadosh Baruch Hu is not saying, "Give *tzedakah* and I will record what you have done. Then, one day, when I review the records, I will reward you for giving *tzedakah*." What really occurs is that while a person is wholeheartedly committed to *chesed*, a *tikkun* of Hashem's world is taking place, and Hashem is with him.

We don't need *derashos* educating people that a person who gives *kimcha d'pische* will have *siyata d'Shmaya* on *leil haSeder*. We need to understand that it's simply a reality. When a Yid opens his heart to others, Hakadosh Baruch Hu enters his heart and will be there during *leil haSeder*.

Hashem's Great Hand

In his *sefer Zera Kodesh* (Chanukah night 5), the Ropshitzer Rebbe references the *Tana D'vei Eliyahu*, and explains:

It certainly must be that Am Yisrael were redeemed from Mitzrayim in the merit of *gemilus chassadim*. In the *piyyut Maoz Tzur*, we see *Yetzias Mitzrayim* described with the phrase הגדולה הוציא את הסגולה – *With His great hand he took out the precious one*.

Based on the *Zohar Hakadosh*, the Ropshitzer explains that ידו הגדולה refers to Hashem's *Middah* of *Chesed*. That is, Hashem took them out of Mitzrayim with the power of *Chesed* (not just 'mercy' in the ordinary sense) – and that must have been a *middah k'neged middah* response to Bnei Yisrael's commitment to do *chesed* with each other.

The Kozhnitzer Maggid, (quoted in *sefer Maggid Tehillos*) goes even further. Prior to leaving Mitzrayim, Hashem asks Moshe Rabbeinu to tell the people to borrow things.

– דִּבֶּר נָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם וְיִשְׁאַלְוּ אִישׁ מֵאֵת רֵעֵהוּ וְאִשָּׁה מֵאֵת רֵעוּתָהּ כְּלֵי כֶסֶף וְכֵלֵי זָהָב –
Please speak in the ears of the people and let each man borrow from his friend, and each woman from her friend, vessels of silver and vessels of gold.

This is usually taken to mean that they should borrow from their Egyptian neighbors. But the Maggid asks: Could it be that the Egyptian oppressors are referred to as רֵעֵהוּ, their friends?

Instead, he explains: Bnei Yisrael were to lend vessels to each other, as a means of increasing *chesed*. They knew that in order to experience the fulfillment of Hashem's promise to Avraham Avinu, וְאַחֲרָי כִּן יִצְאוּ – *And afterwards they will leave with great wealth* – they must first increase *chesed* among themselves.

Many *sefarim* point out that whenever a person is stingy, he is in a state of Mitzrayim. (The word *meitzar* means constraint or limitation.) Each time he tries to take a coin out of his pocket, he suffers pain. When we can see a former miser accustom himself to giving happily, we are observing *Yetzias Mitzrayim*.

Crying Out to Hashem

In *Parshas Shemos*, we find that prior to *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, “Bnei Yisrael cried out to Hashem.” This seems to say that by this time, they had nearly reached the end of the servitude that Hashem had decreed upon them, and when they cried out to Hashem, the *geulah* began. But tzaddikim explain that this pasuk is saying something entirely different.

If Bnei Yisrael had remained as they were, the situation would not have changed, and they would have remained in Mitzrayim. There was a reason for their exile to Mitzrayim. Some change was meant to take place, and until that change happened, they could not move on. One of the changes that had to take place was the transformation from tight-fistedness to generosity.

How does that fit with the simple reading of the *pasuk*, which implies that because they cried out to Hashem, he redeemed them?

The answer is that when they cried out in pain to Hashem, they heard Him telling them, “I have heard your voices and now I will explain what you must do in order to leave Mitzrayim.”

It can be compared to a prisoner who cries out to the warden that he wants to go free. The warden says, “I have heard your cries, and I can no longer bear your suffering; therefore, let me explain what you must do in order to go free.”

So too, the answer to the cries of Bnei Yisrael was the realization that they must make a *bris* of *chesed* with each other, connecting with bonds of love.

Preparing for the Seder

When a person asks Hashem to help him experience Pesach in the

best way possible, he is really asking Hashem to enlighten his mind and help him realize what he must do to escape his own *meitzarim*, his own Mitzrayim. If his *tefillah* is all about asking Hashem to help him feel waves of emotion during the *Seder*, he is making a mistake. Emotions don't get you out of *galus*. Your *tefillah* should focus on asking Hashem to help you become more of a Yid.

As we have seen, the more you help and give to other Jews, the more of a Jew you become. Even if you are not yet at the level to honestly commit yourself to the *bris* of *chesed*, if you increase your giving, you will receive the *siyata d'Shmaya* needed to approach that level.

This is the lesson of the Shulchan Aruch and countless other *sefarim*. The way to prepare for Pesach is by giving *kimcha d'pischa*. Care for the poor, for widows, for orphans, and for the brokenhearted. Worry about them. Go from place to place collecting for them, and encourage others to join you. This is the way to prepare for Pesach.

If you prepare that way, Hashem will illuminate your world and you will be able to go free from any Mitzrayim, all of the constraints that hold back your progress as an *eved Hashem*.



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