YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT DELIVERED BY THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

PARASHAT BEHAR

SICHA OF HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

The Mitzva of Tzedaka

Summarized by Danny Orenbuch

"And if your brother becomes impoverished and his means are low with you, you shall support him - [even] the stranger and the resident, so that he may live with you." (Vayikra 25:35)

"There are eight degrees of tzedaka (charity), in order of merit. The highest degree attainable is to support a Jew who has become impoverished by giving him a gift or a loan or going into partnership with him or finding him work, in order to strengthen him so that he will not need to ask from others. And of this it is said, 'And you shall support him - the stranger and the resident so that he may live with you.' In other words, you shall support him in order that he will not fall into need." (Rambam, Hilkhot Matnot Aniyim 10:7)

 The Rambam describes here the highest degree of tzedaka - helping someone who is in financial straits to make a living.

 But why, we may ask, does this represents the ultimate level of tzedaka? On the words, "If your brother becomes impoverished and sells his property" (Vayikra 25:25), Rashi comments, "This teaches us that a person is not permitted to sell his field unless he is forced to do so out of financial necessity."

 "Your impoverished brother", someone who is forced to sell his fields and his house, or to sell himself into servitude, is a downtrodden and pitiful victim, who is left with nothing and has reached the bottom of the ladder. Would it not seem that the highest level of tzedaka would be prevention of such a situation, ensuring that this degeneration never takes place, rather than the epitome of tzedaka as described by the Rambam?

 Even leaving aside our query on the Rambam - who, after all, is dealing exclusively with the halakhic definition of the mitzva - our question remains. Our suggestion would seem to eliminate the whole basis for tzedaka, for if we prevent the problem of impoverishment, there is no one left needing tzedaka. Would the prevention of poverty in the first place not be regarded itself as tzedaka?

 Let us attempt to answer this question by examining an example from a different sphere. The Gemara in Bava Metzia deals with the mitzva of returning lost property and rules that even in the case of loss of land, there exists the concept of lost property. What does the Gemara mean by this? Let us imagine that a river is overflowing its banks and threatens to engulf a field, and you prevent this by building a dike. Such a preventive measure is considered by the Gemara to constitute restoration of lost property - i.e., as a mitzva in itself.

 Even if there is no clear connection between the prevention and the action itself, this does not undermine the worth of our efforts to prevent problematic situations. Such is the case, for example, in medicine. We certainly support the idea and practice of preventive medicine, despite the fact that by preventing illness we are also preventing the fulfillment of the mitzvot of healing and visiting the sick.

 However, it is more complicated to carry out preventative action in the area of tzedaka. We are accustomed to feeling pity for someone who is impoverished, someone who has nothing, but not for someone who still owns property and is threatened by the prospect of financial loss. A person says to himself, "I'm sure it will all eventually work out for him, or someone else will come along and help him." Sometimes we are not even aware that someone is on the brink of financial disaster. Moreover, at times the potential victim is not a single individual but rather an entire community or an entire socio-economic stratum of the population.

 In the past, the good of the general population - a thriving economic system - used to be perceived as a supreme value, even if in the process some harm would be caused to the weaker strata of the population, who would not be able to keep up with those stronger elements who would survive. Today we are witness to a certain degree of progress in this regard: we strive for equality and justice for all, and an economic system which will work for the good of those less capable as well.

 This need to help the weaker elements of society requires a courageous individual who could stand at the head of such a system, someone with the ability to rise above political and sectarian considerations, someone with the ability to predict and foresee future events and to know how to prevent undesirable situations from coming about.

 "We are obliged to be exceedingly careful in the mitzva of tzedaka - more than any other positive mitzva, because tzedaka is the sign of the descendants of Avraham Avinu, about whom it is written, 'For I know him that he will instruct his descendants... to do tzedaka.' And the throne of Israel will not be restored and the religion of truth will not arise except by means of tzedaka, as it is written, '... with tzedaka shall you be established.'" (Rambam ibid. 10:1)

 The completion and perfection of the religion of truth, according to the Rambam, are to be found principally in tzedaka, in the creation of an economic system which aims towards equality and justice, which takes care of all segments of the nation.

"And Israel is redeemed only by tzedaka, as it is written, 'Tzion will be redeemed with justice and her inhabitants with tzedaka.'" (Rambam ibid.)

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Translated by Kaeren Fish.)