YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***Matanot Le-Evyonim:* Gifts for the Poor**

**Rav Avihud Schwartz**

The *mitzva* of giving gifts to the poor (*matanot le-evyonim*)is the last of the Purim-related *mitzvot* mentioned in the book of *Esther*. At first, the Jews in every province and in every city made Purim a day of feasting and gladness. Later, they added the practice of sending portions to one another (*mishloach manot*). Mordekhai’s last enactment added the *mitzva* of giving gifts to the poor:

And the other Jews that were in the king's provinces gathered themselves together, and stood for their lives… on the thirteenth day of the month Adar, and on the fourteenth day of the same they rested, and made it **a day of feasting and gladness.** But the Jews that were in Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day thereof and on the fourteenth thereof; and on the fifteenth day of the same they rested, and made it **a day of feasting and gladness.**

Therefore do the Jews of the villages, that dwell in the unwalled towns, make the fourteenth day of the month Adar a day of **gladness and feasting, and a festival, and of sending portions one to another.** 

And Mordecai wrote these things and sent letters to all the Jews that were in all the provinces of the king Achashverosh, both nigh and far, to enjoin them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and the fifteenth day of the same yearly… **days of feasting and gladness, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.** (*Esther* 9:16-22)

The *gemara* in *Megilla* (7a) dedicates only a few words to the *mitzva* of sending gifts to the poor, addressing only the extent of the *mitzva*:

R. Yosef taught: "And sending portions one to another" – two gifts to one person. "And gifts to the poor" – two gifts to two people.

### Charity or Gladness?

The *Yerushalmi* (*Megilla* 1:4) cites a well-known *halakha* related to the *mitzva* of *matanot le-evyonim*:

We do not investigate with regard to the *mitzva* of Purim. Rather, anyone who extends his hand to take, we give to him.

Why do we "not investigate with regard to the *mitzva* of Purim?" Is it possible to imagine that the manager of a charity fund would distribute money to anyone who extends his hand, without thoroughly investigating whether or not that person really needs charity?

Because of this objection, the Ritva explains (*Megilla* 7a, s.v. *garsinan*) that the foundation of the *mitzva* of *matanot le-evyonim* is not "the law of charity," but rather a "law of gladness":

It is explained in the Jerusalem Talmud that whoever extends his hand to take, we give him. That is to say, we give to every person, without investigating whether he is poor and fit to receive. For this giving is based not only on the law of charity, but also on the law of gladness, for we send portions even to rich people.

If the *mitzva* of *matanot le-evyonim* were based on the law of charity, it would be appropriate to investigate the poor person's level of need, as is the practice in general with regard to charity. However, since the *mitzva* is not based on the law of charity, the ordinary laws of charity do not apply. The law of *matanot le-evyonim* is based on the law of gladness, and the aim of the *mitzva* is to bring joy to anyone who asks for such a gift. Just as *mishloach manot* are distributed to all people, even if they can afford to purchase for themselves whatever they will need for the Purim feast, *matanot le-evyonim* are similarly given to anybody who extends his hand to take, it being unnecessary to clarify whether or not he is truly poor.

### The purim collections must be utilized for Purim only

The *gemara* in *Bava Metzia* (78b) discusses the procedures related to collecting and distributing *matanot le-evyonim*, and it cites a Tannaitic dispute on the matter:

R. Eliezer said: The Purim collections must be utilized for Purim [only], and the poor may not buy [even] shoe straps with that [money], unless it was stipulated in the presence of the members of the community [that such shall be permitted]; this is the ruling of R. Yaakov in the name of R. Meir. But R. Shimon ben Gamliel is lenient [about the matter].

R. Eliezer asserts that the Purim collections must be utilized for Purim only; the charity managers are not authorized to take money that was given for the purpose of *matanot le-evyonim* and use it for other communal ends. This is in contrast to other charity money, which the Halakha has determined may be rerouted to further additional objectives – for example, the redeeming of captives. This ruling was accepted by all and was codified by the *Shulchan Arukh*: "The money collected for Purim may not to be diverted to another charity" (*Orach Chayyim* 694:2).

R. Yaakov adds to R. Eliezer's ruling that even the poor person himself is not permitted to use the money that was given to him for any other purpose that is not connected to the joy of Purim. According to him, a poor person may not pay a shoemaker for his work with the money that he received for Purim; rather, he must use the money exclusively to enhance his enjoyment of the holiday and for the Purim feast. R. Shimon ben Gamliel disagrees and maintains that the poor person may use the money he receives for *matanot le-evyonim* however he sees fit.

Ostensibly, this disagreement is also based on the question we raised earlier. If the *mitzva* of *matanot le-evyonim* is based on the law of charity, the poor person should be allowed to use the money for any purpose, as is the case with any other money received as charity. But if the *mitzva* is based on the law of gladness, the poor person should have to use the money exclusively for the enhancement of his joy on the holiday, and specifically for the Purim feast.

It is, however, possible that all the *Tanna’im* agree that the *mitzva* of *matanot le-evyonim* is based on the law of gladness; the disagreement between them relates to the scope of this gladness. R. Yaakov maintains that *matanot le-evyonim* should be used exclusively for the Purim feast because is it in this feast that the joy of Purim is realized in the most striking manner, as it is stated: "And they made it a day of feasting and gladness" (*Esther* 9:17). In contrast, R. Shimon ben Gamliel maintains that the goal of *matanot le-evyonim* is to bring joy to the poor – whether through the purchase of food items for his Purim feast or for the repair of his shoe straps that tore. The poor person's joy cannot be complete if his shoes are torn, and therefore he may utilize *matanot le-evyonim* for their repair.

If this is correct, we can connect the two sister *mitzvot* that apply on Purim – the *mitzva* of *mishloach manot* and the *mitzva of matanot le-evyonim*. The *Chatam Sofer* (*Responsa*, *Orach Chayyim* 1:197) offers two possible reasons for the *mitzva* of *mishloach manot*: concern that the poor should have what they need for the Purim feast or increasing joy, love, peace and friendship. According to R. Yaakov, who maintains that the joy of Purim is focused exclusively on the feast, *mishloach manot* is meant for the needs of the meal, and *matanot le-evyonim* should similarly be used exclusively for the Purim feast. According to R. Shimon ben Gamliel, the joy of Purim extends to other needs as well, and therefore *matanot le-evyonim* can be spent on these needs. Even *mishloach manot* are meant to increase the feelings of friendship and brotherhood, and not just to cover the needs of the meal.

### Is a poor person obligated in the *mitzva* of *matanot le-evyonim*?

The *Acharonim* disagree on the question of whether a poor person who has no money is obligated to give *matanot le-evyonim*. The *Taz* (*Orach Chayyim* 694:1) writes in the name of his father-in-law, R. Yoel Sirkes, author of the *Bach*:

My revered father-in-law writes that even a poor person who is supported by charity [is obligated in *matanot le-evyonim*], as is the case with the four cups of wine on Pesach, and as opposed to other charity….

In contrast, the *Peri Chadash* writes that a poor person is exempt from this *mitzva*:

There are those who write that even a poor person who is supported by charity is obligated to give *matanot le-evyonim.* But this makes no sense. Rather, it stands to reason that he is certainly exempt.

If the mitzva of *matanot le-evyonim* is a *mitzva* of charity, there is indeed no reason to obligate a poor person, who himself lives off of the donations of others. Those *Poskim* who maintain that even poor people are obligated to give *matanot le-evyonim* understand that this *mitzva* is not the ordinary *mitzva* of charity, but rather a special *mitzva* of increasing joy on Purim, which applies even to poor people.

### The joy of *matanot le-evyonim*

The Rambam (*Hilkhot Megilla* 2:17) writes in praise of the *mitzva* of *matanot le-evyonim*:

It is preferable for a person to be more liberal with his donations to the poor than to be lavish in his preparation of the Purim feast or in sending portions to his friends. For there is no greater and more splendid happiness than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the converts. One who brings happiness to the hearts of these unfortunate individuals resembles the *Shekhina*, which is described as having the tendency "to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive those with broken hearts" (*Yeshaya* 57:15).

The *mitzva* of charity brings twofold joy: the joy experienced by the giver for the blessings he received from God, which allow him to give to others, and the joy experienced by the receiver from knowing that he has not been forgotten or left with nothing.[[1]](#footnote-1) All of the *mitzvot* of Purim are meant to increase joy and gladness, and the *mitzva* of *matanot le-evyonim* achieves this goal in a two-fold manner – through the joy of the giver and the through the joy of the receiver.

The joy of the giver and the joy of the receiver is joined by the joy of God Himself, as is explained by R. Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (*Kedushat Levi*, *Purim*):

On this day, one should liberally distribute gifts to the poor with great joy and gladness. Even though one should at all times and every day distribute charity liberally and with great joy, today on Purim one should rejoice exceedingly when he fulfills the *mitzva* of *matanot le-evyonim.* For just as the Jew gives charity to the poor and clothes himself in the attribute of lovingkindness and acts in a loving manner with the poor person, so he causes God to clothe Himself in the attribute of lovingkindness and bestow bounty with his love… and be very happy with this *mitzva.*

One should not instruct the members of his household to give the money to the poor. Rather, he himself should hand it over generously and good-heartedly to the messenger through whom he is sending the gifts to the poor. It is best to send his *matanot le-evyonim* by way of his young sons and daughters in order to train them in the *mitzvot*. I remember that when I was a child, my father sent gifts to various poor people through me, and not through a servant, in order to train me in the *mitzva*. And it should all be done with joy and a good heart.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. According to the Ramban in his addenda to the Rambam's *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* (negative commandment 17), the Torah commands one to give charity with joy, and not with a narrow heart, as it is stated: "You shall surely give him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give him" (*Devarim* 15:10). So too rules the *Shulchan Arukh* (*Yoreh De'a* 249:3): "One must give charity with a favorable disposition, with joy and with a good heart… But if one gives charity with a sullen and angry face, he forfeits the credit [that is otherwise] due him." [↑](#footnote-ref-1)