

Rabbi's Reflections:            Judaism: A World View

Jews see the world differently than Christians. The upcoming High Holiday *Musaf* prayer, *Un'tanneh Tokef* contains the famous line, *U-t'shuvah, u-t'fillah, u-tz'dakah ma'avirin et ro'a ha-g'zerah*, "But repentance, prayer, and *tz'dakah* (charity, good deeds, righteousness) (can) avert the decree's severity." Rabbi Max Arzt comments, "for our character is determined not by what happens to us but by what we do in the face of circumstances. A moral person responds. A spiritually inanimate individual only reacts. This...prayer affirms that the quality of our life depends on our will-power and on our free choice." If the decree refers to death, Rabbi Herman Kieval says the prayer means, "Death is inevitable, but the tragedy of a meaningless life can be averted." (Read Viktor Frankl's marvelous short book, *Man's Search for Meaning*.)

*T'shuvah* is both the feeling of penitence and the act of repentance, turning (its literal meaning) away from past behavior because it is wrong and for which we must make amends. Then we must not repeat it. Presumably it is first because it affirms the principle of freedom of choice and the promise of salvation.

*T'fillah* avers that by words to God we affirm and crystallize our faith, aspirations, and ideals, and that God can purify us once we confess our guilt. It then reinforces our ability to follow through on our promise and resolve by drawing power on God's beneficent goodness (based on Arzt and Rabbi Milton Steinberg).

*Tz'dakah* literally means "justice" or "righteousness" but often is translated as "charity" or "good deeds." In the *piyyut* (poem), it affirms that words and desires are not enough, we must act, put our money where our mouth is. God singled out Abraham to teach his descendants *tz'dakah u-mishpat*, "righteousness and justice" (Genesis 18:19); Deuteronomy 16:20 commands us to "pursue justice, justice," and Deuteronomy 15:4-11 requires us to give freely to the poor as they will never cease. While Judaism believes in the right of possession and institution of private property, it assumes a certain trusteeship implicit in that ownership (Arzt).

*Tz'dakah* makes certain assumptions that no English word conveys, and so Jewish understandings, as defined by *halakhah* (literally, "way of life" and usually translated as "law") differ from others. Which is better: \$10 freely given or \$100 grudgingly given? The Christian answer is \$10 freely given, which is what the root for "charity" means ("philanthropy" means "love of human beings," also implying freely given out of love and not as a response to a command). The Jewish answer is \$100 grudgingly given. The Bible commands us to give. We might get a bigger reward in Heaven for doing it willingly, but we must give for we have an obligation to better the world.

Possessions are not ours for God created the whole world. Tithing is based on this. Once the Temple was gone, we transferred tithing's concepts to *tz'dakah*. Hence, the medium level of *tz'dakah* is 10%, but we have a lesser step for lower income people who can afford something, and, unlike Christianity, an upper limit (20%) since the giver cannot end up on the dole. Christians use gross income, pre-taxes, as the base. Jews

use net income, after taxes, since taxes are withheld (so it is not income) and because the tax rates in previous ages were higher and included a special Jew tax in Christian or Muslim countries. Moreover, our highest level of *tz'dakah* is not on Christian scales: to provide the poor with a job, or a loan to start a business. This preserves a poor person's dignity, keeps people off the relief roles, and adds to the *tz'dakah* fund. One commentator says that the giver receives more reward because the receiver only benefits in this world while the giver benefits in the world to come (*K'li Yakar*, Exodus 22:24). In order to reap the reward and fulfill the *mitzvah* (commandment), the poor of Eastern Europe had one poor person give to another and so none are out any money.

Finally, *halakhah* requires a general *tz'dakah* contribution after thirty days of moving to a community, an additional contribution to the soup kitchen after three months, and a further contribution to the funeral fund for the poor, etc., after nine months. Giving to poor parents counts towards fulfilling the *mitzvah* (unlike Christianity), and we have a hierarchy of giving starting with poor relatives, our city's poor, then other cities' poor, but the poor of Israel precede the poor of the Diaspora. Even if we cannot give at the moment, we still must treat the poor respectfully.

Many of us grew up with a *pushke* (*tz'dakah*, or alms box) in which our parents often put money, or asked us to do so before *Shabbat*, holidays, and special events like *bar/bat mitzvah*, weddings, etc. It is no wonder that Jews are bigger donors than non-Jews. I often hear Christian clergy involved in social action projects wish they could be like Jews and simply tell their congregations that they must give rather than trying to appeal to their Christian sense of love. Perpetuate this Jewish way of looking at the world. Pass it on to the next generation. This is what Jews have always done.