

Tzedakah and Jewish Identity: The Shefa Fund's Vision by Lawrence Bush and Jeffrey Dekro

Tzedakah is the spiritual love potion of Judaism. Performance of this mitzvah awakens the soul — to the humanity of others, to the binding ties of community, and to the reality of our covenantal partnership with God. Over and over, the Jewish tradition describes the centrality of tzedakah in Judaism's cosmology: It “saves from death” (Proverbs 28:27 and Bava Batra 10a), it “equals all the other commandments” (Bava Batra 9a), it is incumbent on all, including people living in poverty (Gittin 7b), its denial amounts to idolatry (Peah 4:20).

In our era of checkbook charity, easy consumerism, and fractured community, how can we convey the formative power of this mitzvah to Jewish families? How do we restore tzedakah to its role as a foundation stone of Jewish identity?

Our organization, The Shefa Fund, is pursuing a three-pronged strategy for achieving this goal. Though we are not an educational organization per se, it is fair to classify these strategic elements under the rubrics of adult education, family education and youth education.

Adult education: We are cultivating the perception of tzedakah as a significant form of socially responsible action, and are thereby channeling the socially responsible impulses of the majority of American Jews into a Jewish harbor.

Family education: We are forging links between tzedakah and the themes of Jewish holidays and life-passages that have a tenacious centrality in Jewish family life — for example, Shabbat and Hanukkah.

Youth education: We are serving as manager for Keren Mach'ar: The Fund for Tomorrow, an innovative new program of Jewish service learning for high school students.

Tzedakah as Social Responsibility

For past generations of American Jews, social justice work took place on many fronts -- union organizing; electoral campaigns; street demonstrations; radical, liberal and Zionist party-building; housing and consumer activism; the development of political theory. Jews were leaders and participants in many such venues, so much so that a fair history of American social struggle could be outlined by a simple list of Jewish names: Emma Goldman, Rose Schneiderman, Betty Friedan, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, Abraham Joshua Heschel, I.F. Stone, Bella Abzug, Harvey Milk, Abbie Hoffman . . .

Today, however, many of the “old” modes of grassroots activism that engaged Jews have become less natural and relevant to many Jewish lives. Jewish idealism remains a force to be reckoned with, but the material self-interest of American Jews is no longer so obviously entwined with union struggles, tenant strikes, and so on. This is thanks to the American Jewish success story — an amazing story, in which a poor and persecuted ethnic and religious group becomes the wealthiest minority in the wealthiest country in the world! The political significance of our roles as investors, venture capitalists, consumers, employers, inheritors of wealth, and givers of tzedakah, has come to the fore. The Shefa Fund has helped to make this trend a conscious force in American Jewish life — and to guide tzedakah in socially responsible directions.

We view tzedakah in the light shined by Rabbi Yonah, who taught (in the Jerusalem Talmud, Pe'ah 8:8) that we should use “all our faculties” when considering how to perform the mitzvah. With American Jewish wealth and clout at a level that would never have been imagined by our sages, Jews have a responsibility to shape tzedakah programs that go far deeper and wider than the food and clothing drives that make for standard “Mitzvah Day” fare. Tzedakah should mobilize our business wisdom, our organizational know-how, our contacts, our resources, and our Jewish values to create transformative partnerships with communities in need. Tzedakah thus becomes a foundation stone of what we call the “Torah of Money,”¹ Judaism’s dynamic teaching about wealth, resources and community.

Spending and Investing

“Mission-based investing” is one Torah of Money strategy that The Shefa Fund has emphasized in reaching out to Jewish organizations. We emphasize that it is not only spending (grantmaking, programming, etc.) but also investing² our money that can have major social impact, consonant with our organizational missions. For example, Shefa’s program of low-income community development, Tzedec, has catalyzed more than \$10 million in Jewish Federation and foundation investments in low-income community development financial institutions (CDFIs), which provide credit for housing and jobs development to credit-starved neighborhoods. CDFIs are following the model of the Hebrew Free Loan Societies and landsmanshaften (communal societies) that were so critical, in the early part of the 20th century, to Jews surviving and thriving in the rough-and-tumble of the immigration experience and the sweatshop economy. CDFIs also represent a modern fulfillment of Maimonides’ concept of the “highest” degree of tzedakah — social investment, making a loan or a partnership with people living in poverty so that our aspirations and our well-being become intertwined with theirs. Tzedec thus gives new meaning to classic historical and spiritual Jewish understandings of tzedakah.

Similarly, Shefa’s donor-advised grantmaking (\$4 million during the past fiscal year) is informed by careful research that identifies and builds relationships with organizations doing the most innovative or consistently reliable work for social and economic justice, Jewish feminist education, Middle East peace and justice, Jewish gay and lesbian empowerment, and Jewish youth organizing. The anonymity emphasized as a virtue by Maimonides is less important to us, in our highly individualized and non-communal culture, than is the humanizing influence of hands-on tzedakah in which funders, activists and recipients make common cause.

Tzedakah and the Holidays

People on The Shefa Fund’s mailing list have enjoyed receiving mailing inserts that link the themes of Hanukkah and Shabbat to the practice of tzedakah. At Hanukkah, we suggest that the custom of giving gelt, small gifts of money, be transformed into a major tzedakah effort. Each night, a different Hanukkah theme can be explored for the purpose of guiding a tzedakah decision. By combining end-of-the-tax-year charitable giving with home celebrations of Hanukkah, families can be true to the rabbinic tradition (which emphasizes both Torah study and tzedakah during this season) and greatly heighten the tikkun olam element of their observance. For example:

1. Hanukkah coincides with the darkest nights of the year and has roots in ancient winter solstice festivals. Devote a discussion to Judaism and ecological issues — and give tzedakah to an environmental group.
2. Hanukkah embodies its symbolism through foods, especially fried potatoes (Ashkenazic) and dough (Sephardic) to represent the “miracle of oil” at the rededication of the Temple. Talk about the

(Sephardic) to represent the “miracle of oil” at the rededication of the Temple. Talk about the symbolism of food brands and the realities of food budgets. What does it mean to try to feed a family for 63¢ per person per meal (estimate for a family of four living at the federal poverty level of \$15,100)? Give tzedakah to a hunger relief project.

3. “Women are obligated to light the Hanukkah menorah,” says the Talmud (Shabbat 23a), for they took part in the miracle.” One story tells of the daughter of the high priest, facing violation by the Syrian-Greek governor, who shames her brothers into revolt. A second story “borrows” the saga of Judith cutting off the head of the Assyrian tyrant Holofernes. Dedicate one night to a discussion of women and resistance — and give tzedakah to a feminist organization.

Hanukkah lore thus becomes intertwined with discussions about tzedakah and how we can use it to help repair the world. Similarly, for Shabbat we have developed seven tzedakah ideas, based on Shabbat symbols. By using these ideas as a springboard for creativity, families can turn their pushke (the traditional tzedakah box) into a source of Jewish learning and social action. For example:

Blessing children: “Each child,” says a Yiddish proverb, “carries her own blessing into the world.” We affirm this on Shabbat by pausing, as soon as candles are lit, so children can be blessed by their elders. Tzedakah, too, can be used to cultivate the unique blessing of each child: to lift kids out of poverty and abuse, to teach diversity and human rights in school, to honor each child as a living bearer of Torah. Candle Lighting: Lighting Sabbath candles is one of only three rituals that Jewish tradition assigns to women. The response of Jewish feminists to this meager portion has not been to turn our backs, but to use candle lighting as a core ritual of an expanded Jewish women’s culture. Tzedakah, too, can be used to cultivate the heat and light of feminism.³

Keren Mach”ar — The Fund for Tomorrow

KEREN MACH”AR — The Fund for Tomorrow is a new service learning project conceived and directed by Rabbi Jonathan Spira-Savett, former Director of Programs at the Solomon Schechter High School of Long Island, where the program was piloted in the Spring of 2000 (Please see the related story on page 31 by Rabbi Spira-Savett). Keren Mach”ar teaches teenage Jews about poverty, community development, and economic justice in America through ongoing service framed by study and reflection. Keren Mach”ar has three programmatic branches: The Service and Grantmaking Program, The Community Investment Program, and The Microenterprise Program. The program was selected last summer as one of the first groups to participate in Bikkurim, an incubator co-sponsored by the Jewish Education Service of North America and the United Jewish Communities that provides office space, communications, and consultation for five new Jewish nonprofit projects for two years. The Shefa Fund currently provides fiscal sponsorship, oversight, and administrative support for Keren Mach”ar (josavett@jtsa.edu).

In a related vein, Shefa has inspired Hebrew schools to deposit a set portion of their tzedakah each year in local CDFIs, which make loans to alleviate poverty in the very cities where our Jewish communities are concentrated. If synagogue Sisterhoods and/or Men’s Clubs match these deposits, the amounts grow substantially. Because the money is invested rather than given away, the growing account brings a wonderful sense of continuity to each year’s Hebrew school class. Participating classes can visit houses that were built with loans made with their money, meet children living in the communities served by CDFIs, and pursue many other activities that bring a deeply humanizing element to tzedakah education.

In all of this tzedakah-oriented programming, Shefa's purpose is not merely to capitalize on Jewish generosity to support liberal causes. Rather, we believe, with Rabbi Yehoshua (Leviticus Rabbah 34:8), that "the person in poverty does more for the householder than the householder does for the one in need." Expanding the landscape of what we call "politics" to include the Jewish money culture means nothing less than expanding the sphere of life in which Jewish identity has impact and significance. There is a "spiritual self-interest" here:⁴ the authentication of Jewish values so that Jewish identity becomes central, rather than peripheral, to daily life. In recent writings in Tikkun magazine, we have argued for the importance of this spiritual self-interest by identifying a highest "Ninth Degree of Tzedakah" (expanding Maimonides' traditional eight), which we define as partnership with non-Jews, based on Jewish values.

It is the latter part of this phrase, "based on Jewish values," that is as critical to us as the causes for which we organize funds. Our challenge is not merely to convince Jews to be generous, but to re-root their generosity in the soil of Judaism. The fact is that most American Jews are universalist in orientation. They reveal this by contributing as much or more to non-Jewish projects and causes as to Jewish ones. A recent report by Amos: The National Jewish Partnership for Social Justice confirmed this, showing that a large majority of Jews perceive "making the world a better place" to be more central to Jewish identity than faith, Torah study or Jewish-oriented philanthropy. Eighty percent of those polled urged "more social justice programs and activities" for Jewish organizations, yet only 15% expressed a strong preference for doing social justice work under Jewish auspices. Our concept of the Ninth Degree of Tzedakah is an activist response to this trend towards universalism. Our fundamental goal is to renew Jewish identity and affiliation through the conscientious performance of tzedakah.

Jeffrey Dekro is founder and president of The Shefa Fund, a national public foundation established in 1988. Lawrence Bush works as communications consultant for Shefa and is editor of a forthcoming new edition of Leo Rosten's classic The Joys of Yiddish. Dekro and Bush are co-authors of Jews, Money & Social Responsibility, a resource book (1993).

Footnotes:

1. The phrase, "Torah of Money," is a service mark of The Shefa Fund.
2. Consistent with our emphasis on socially responsible investing as a mode of tzedakah, Shefa is one of only two Jewish organizations belonging to the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility (ICCR), the main address for faith-based shareholder activism aimed at cultivating corporate citizenship.
3. These resources can be obtained from The Shefa Fund at info@shefafund.org, (215) 483-4004.
4. Investing in community development also has an element of material self-interest for Jews. Community-based housing development for low-income seniors across the country, for example, has benefitted our aging Jewish population immensely. In Boston, the area's only microenterprise loan fund — which makes loans of \$250-5,000 to help create or sustain tiny businesses with only one or two employees — has created jobs for Ethiopian and Russian Jews along with other immigrants and minorities. In northern New Jersey, the Jewish Family and Children's Service of the MetroWest Jewish Federation network borrowed from the New Jersey Community Loan Fund for a \$250,000 capital project to enlarge its space and provide expanded services. Community development improves the metropolitan areas that remain the centers of Jewish life and offers opportunities for Jewish-owned businesses to reinvest in

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neighborhoods stabilized by community development activity. And with federal cutbacks dramatically affecting Jewish Federations and service providers, the mutual benefits of partnership between Jewish institutions and community development financial institutions are increasingly clear.