

The Reward of Tzedakah  
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What is the reward of tzedakah? Some of us may answer that tzedakah is its own reward—that we are fulfilled by the joy of helping others, or by the knowledge that we are contributing to making the world a more just place

Many traditional Jewish texts suggest that tzedakah brings more concrete rewards. A number of rabbinic stories speak of people who, because of their acts of tzedakah, are miraculously saved from death. According to other teachings, one who is on the way to giving tzedakah is immune from harm. This belief has led to the practice, among some Jews, of giving tzedakah money to one going on a long trip, especially a trip to Israel. As long as the person is carrying money to be donated to tzedakah at his/her destination, the thinking goes, nothing will happen to this person during the journey.

Much of the rabbinic discussion of the concrete rewards of tzedakah centers around a verse in *Kohelet (Ecclesiastes)*, the biblical book that we read on the Shabbat during Sukkot:

Send your bread forth upon the waters, for after many days you will find it. (11:1)

The midrashim on this verse offer a number of stories in which individuals or the Jewish people are saved as a result of having given tzedakah. In one story, a man gives tzedakah as he is boarding a boat and, as a result, is miraculously saved from a shipwreck. In another story, Bar Kappara, an early rabbinic figure, generously clothes and feeds a Roman shipwreck survivor. Years later Rome captures and oppresses the Jews. Bar Kappara goes to Rome to beg mercy for the Jews, and finds that the man he once saved has become the governor of Rome. The governor recognizes Bar Kappara and agrees to relieve the Jews' suffering.

Stories like these, as well as other rabbinic discussions of the concrete rewards of tzedakah, are both comforting and troubling. On the one hand, we might like to think that nothing will happen to us as long as we are engaged in acts of tzedakah. On the other hand, our real-life experiences of good and evil do not allow us the luxury of believing that the righteous are always rewarded. The suggestion that God rewards those who do tzedakah is a potentially harmful one—from the stories of people who are miraculously saved as a result of having given tzedakah, one may easily conclude that a person who is *not* saved from death must not have given tzedakah.

The most traditional Jewish response to this theological dilemma suggests that those who give tzedakah will be rewarded in the world to come, if not in this world. We might also understand the connection between tzedakah and reward as a promise that, in the end, our entire society will benefit from the tzedakah of individuals. Alternately, we might argue that the existence of these moral fables about the rewards of tzedakah teaches the permissibility of giving in order to receive a reward. We are

reminded here of the famous rabbinic dictum, “*mitokh shelo lishmah ba lishmah*”—observing the mitzvot, even for some ulterior motive, will eventually lead to observing the mitzvot for their own sake. (Talmud Pesachim 50b) One who is prompted to give tzedakah in the hopes of someday miraculously being saved from a shipwreck may learn to give tzedakah without expecting a reward.

While rejecting the idea that individuals can save themselves from death by giving tzedakah, we may also use the story of Bar Kappara to suggest that the miracles of tzedakah are enacted at the communal level. Again, history will not allow us to believe that the physical survival of the Jewish people depends on our commitment to tzedakah. But perhaps our spiritual survival *does* depend on our acts of tzedakah. In giving tzedakah, we define ourselves as an ethical community, bound by a sense of responsibility for those around us.

Ultimately, any attempt to define the rewards of tzedakah remains problematic. We know from experience that tzedakah is not always rewarded. Additionally, our understanding of the nature of obligation prompts us to see to see tzedakah as something that should be done *lishmah*—for its own sake. That is—we give tzedakah because we are obligated to do so, and because the world needs our tzedakah—and not because of the reward that tzedakah brings us. Perhaps giving *lishmah* means that we choose the recipients of our tzedakah based on who needs our help the most—and not according to which type of giving will bring us the greatest satisfaction.

At the same time, many of us do expect some reward for doing tzedakah—whether that reward is the public acknowledgment of a gift, or the good feelings that come from donating money or volunteering. When, this Sukkot, we read the verse, “Send your bread forth upon the waters. . .” we can remember that the midrashic understandings of this text allow us to leave open the tension between our desire to do tzedakah *lishmah* and our sometime need for reward. After all—*mitokh shelo lishmah, ba lishmah*. Tzedakah done for the sake of reward may eventually lead to a life-long practice of giving tzedakah without any expectation of a return.

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