What is the Mitzvah?

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Judaism as we know it is a way of life punctuated with sacred obligations, what we commonly refer to as mitzvot, or commands.

There is lots of "do-ing" in Judaism. Do this, do that, do many things.

Most of the mitzvot are generally well known. They include the Kosher obligations - what one may eat and what one may not eat, the holy days, such as Shabbat, High Holy Days, Pesah, Shavuot, Sukkot, etc., the obligations surrounding prayer, including donning of tefilin, recitation of the faith affirmation known as Shema, and a full array of person-to-person obligations.

In some instances, the obligation is clear cut, and the requirements needed to accurately fulfill the obligation are well defined. This does not mean that fulfilling the mandate is easy, just that it clear what exactly the requirements are.

II

Ironically, the most challenging obligations are the person-to-person obligations, because even though the obligation is one-sided, resting only on the do-er, the fulfilment is not; it goes beyond the do-er.

To be more precise, it incumbent upon us to give charity to the needy, but it is not necessarily true that merely by giving alms to the poor we have fulfilled the mitzvah.

Arguably, most of the charity that we dispense is to institutions - synagogues, schools, old age homes, hospitals, etc. The charity benefits people, but the charity is not given to a person. It is given to an

institution.

Less frequent are the times when the charity is transmitted from hand to hand. The poor who knock on the door or who visit the synagogue are the exceptions. And it is this type of hand-to-hand charity that is more challenging.

We are told that "you must surely open your hand to that person" (the poor) (Deuteronomy, 15:8).

The wording of this directive seems odd. After all, it is hardly possible to handle anything with a closed hand. Sefer Haredim, the wonderful but not very well known compilation of the mitzvot authored by Rabbi Elazar Azikri, a contemporary of Rabbi Yosef Karo and Rabbi Yitzhak Luria, makes a fascinating observation regarding this wording. He states that the "open your hand" term is a metaphor for the obligation to give charity with "a good heart and with joy" (Sefer Haredim, Jerusalem: 5750, p. 87, no. 23).

Giving in a tight fisted manner conveys the attitude that one would preferably not give anything, but there is no choice because one is obligated.Giving with an open hand, with a hand that reflects the open heart, is given with joy, the joy of the opportunity to help.

The poor are already downtrodden. Helping them in a miserly fashion will give them the resources they need, but will make them feel miserable in the process. By conveying joy at being able to help, the poor are made to feel good even in a most unpleasant circumstance.

III

So, the mitzvah of tsedaka, properly fulfilled addresses both the financial and emotional situations of the poor. We are asked to uplift the poor in the very process of helping them. Tsedaka is far from a perfunctory mitzvah. It can hardly be actualized without heart and soul.
And most important, it establishes a key component in person-to-person mitzvah fulfillment - the impact of one's actions on the other.

This is admittedly a bit tricky, since it is entirely possible that someone approaches the tsedaka opportunity in exactly the right way - with sensitivity to the poor person, and giving joyfully, with a full heart. Yet, try as the person may, the poor person reacts very negatively, with no gratitude, even with complaints.

The hope is that by being charitable with a full heart, the poor will feel that, and will be uplifted. But there are no guarantees this will actually transpire. The Torah does not ask the impossible of us. It just asks that we approach the tsedaka situation in a caring manner. The rest is not always in the hands of the tsedaka actualizer.

IV

The mitzva of tsedaka is one among many obligations of the person-to-person genre that are two way streets. The obligation to honor one's parents, to assure the happiness of one's spouse, to love one's fellow, are other classic examples of this mitzva category.

Proffering kindness, though not immediately recognized as a mitzva obligation, is actually a mitzva (Exodus, 18:20; Sefer Haredim, p. 88, #31).Thus, visiting the sick, burying the dead (Sefer Haredim, p.

88, #32), escorting a guest who is departing on a journey (Sefer Haredim, p. 96, #10), accompanying the deceased to burial (see Sefer Haredim, p. 97, #11), are all under the umbrella of extending kindness.

Interestingly, all the aspects of kindness that we are called upon to fulfill fall under the mitzva to emulate God (Deuteronomy 28:9; Talmud, Sotah 14a; Sefer Haredim, p. 88, #31).

Being nice and caring is more than a social nicety. It is the way that we reach the pinnacle of humaneness - emulating God, doing the Godly, raising ourselves into the sphere of holiness.

There are many ways that seekers of holiness go about realizing this lofty goal. The fact that one can realize this through how one treats other human beings in all sorts of human interactions, sometimes gets lost in the search.What exactly differentiates a person-to-person mitzva obligation done perfunctorily, from one that is done correctly, as a true emulation of God?

At the risk of over-generalizing, the difference may be in whether the mitzvah is expressed as self-actualization, or is expressed as an expression of self-transcendence.

V

To more fully appreciate this, it helps to understand the parameters of two mitzvot that fall under the heading of loving your fellow as one would love one's self (Leviticus, 19:18).

These are 1. visiting the sick, and 2. comforting the bereaved.

Even though Maimonides considers these as Rabbinic obligations, he clearly states that fulfilling these obligations falls under the Biblical heading of "...love your fellow as you would love yourself." (Maimonides, Mishnah Torah, Laws of Mourning, 14:4).

Others, including Rabbenu Yonah, consider visiting the sick and comforting the bereaved to be biblically mandated directives. The bottom line common denominator is that though there are differences of opinion on the source for these obligations, the fulfillments are biblical in nature.

Further concerning visiting the sick, consider the profound statement by Rabbi Elazar Azikri, that the obligation to visit the sick has not been completely fulfilled if the visitor does not pray for the sick person (Sefer Haredim, pp. 64-65, #39).Undoubtedly, simply visiting the sick is a commendable act. But when one senses the pain of one's fellow, that pain should be felt in one's heart, to the point that one prays earnestly to God to have compassion on the person in pain.
In order to really feel the pain of the one who is not well, it is usually necessary to converse with the person who is in pain, to hear what the sick person is going through both physically and emotionally (Sefer Haredim, p. 76, #47).

There are many ways to manifest true caring, including spending appropriate time with the unwell person, addressing their needs when possible, as well as offering encouragement and hope. But the ultimate caring inheres in approaching the Ultimate, in entreating God. That prayer shows the true depths of genuine concern, and is the pivotal ingredient in the fulfillment of the mitzvah.

All this is by way of stressing that merely visiting a person who is not well is not the complete mitzva. Merely showing up and being there is laudable presuming it is not simply a thing "I have to do," and is

rather something "I want to do."

For the mitzva to be complete, it must go beyond self expression, beyond crossing it off the bucket list, into the sphere of self-transcendence, going beyond one's self into the sphere of true caring for the other.

VI

Another mitzva that is not as simple as it seems is to comfort mourners.

Generally, we visit mourners almost reflexively, with little thought as to how exactly the mitzva is fulfilled. This is not done with bad intentions. Perhaps it is just assumed that the purpose is so obvious, that all one needs is to just do it.

It is a natural instinct of well-meaning people to feel bad for those who have suffered a loss, followed by a strong desire to help them. Help in this regard comes in many forms. It can take the form of being there to take care of needs that arise. It can take the form of sending food to the mourners. It can take the form of visitation, taking time to be with the mourners. All these are surely quite commendable.

But it would be helpful to ask ourselves the following deceptively simple question - what exactly should be the goal when comforting mourners? Toward what should we be aiming?

The simple answer is that we should be aiming to comfort the mourners. That is undoubtedly true. But the question that follows is - how exactly do we go about comforting mourners?

The answer here too seems simple - by saying the right things. But what are the right things? What are the right words? Are there formulaic words when visiting the bereaved?

Again, the simple answer is yes, there is a formula. Among Ashkenazim it is - *HaMakom Yenahem Et'hem B'Tokh She'ar Avaylay Ziyyon v'Yerushalayim*, meaning - May God comfort you among the other mourners for Zion & Jerusalem. Among Sephardim, it is—*Min haShamayim Tenuhamu*—may you be comforted from Heaven.

That fulfills the bottom line obligation. But there is more. There are things to avoid when comforting mourners, as there are when visiting the sick, including not overstaying the visit, and most critically, not resorting to cliches that are at best meaningless, and at worst, quite harmful.

For example, never say to someone who has lost a parent who lived into their 90's - well, he or she had a long life anyway. It is one thing for mourners to be grateful for having parents who lived a long and wonderful life. It is quite another for comforters to trivialize the impact of the passing with an "oh, well, it is really not that tragic." These are painful words for any mourner to hear.

Never say to an aspiring father and mother who have lost their child - well, you are young, and you will have so much more opportunity to have children.That may be true, but the parents are lamenting the immediate loss, and are feeling real anguish. Downplaying the severity of the loss is most unhelpful.

There are a host of too often employed thoughtless phrases that need to be removed from one's vocabulary when comforting the bereaved.

VII

But what should be the intent when visiting the bereaved? Just to be there? That is usually better than nothing.

But there is better, a somewhat surprising better. A few helpful suggestions in this regard are presented in Minhat Shmuel, by Rabbi Shmuel Khoshkrman (2016, Vol. 1, p. 390).

He cites the view of Hafetz Hayyim that the key is to help alleviate the pain of the mourner through heartfelt conversation. He then cites the view of SheLaH that one should relate good things to the mourner to the point of actually making the mourner happy, with a more pleasant face. And then, he quotes from Shevet Levi, based on the Zohar, that one must prepare one's self, before the visit, with the right words to achieve that goal.

Visiting the bereaved just became much more complicated. Or, to put it more accurately, much more precise, much more focussed, much less self-centered and much more outer directed.

To think about what words will comfort the mourner, and then to share those words - this is the true actualization of the mitzva.

But what if one cannot come up with such words. Then, silence is better, coupled with the standard formula.

But putting one's self into the situation of others, and asking what would they like to hear that will be helpful - that is how we show our love for others as we would love ourselves.

A few helpful ideas include sharing stories about the deceased that bring a smile to the mourners, or words of praise to the mourner for the care they offered, assuming of course that this is truly the case.

VIII

The examples of charity, visiting the sick, and comforting mourners, all point to a vital ingredient when approaching person-to-person responsibilities - the intended recipient of our kindness and concern.

It is not enough to exhibit concern. This must be coupled with going the extra mile to assure that the recipient of the concern is uplifted, encouraged, and made to feel better by our actions.

These mitzva fulfillments may have thus become a bit more challenging. But, at the same time, they have become much more rewarding. And ultimately, much more of what God wants from us - to establish a community that truly and meaningfully cares. That is the mitzva.

Judaism, as we began, is much about do-ing. But it is about much more than do-ing. It is do-ing plus. It is do-ing with care, it is do-ing with kindness, it is do-ing in a transcending manner; in a word - do-ing with heart and soul.