

## **“If your brother becomes impoverished and his means falter in your proximity, you shall strengthen him.” (25:35)**

The responsibility to help a Jew in financial need is a serious one. We live in a time when financial struggling has, regrettably, become a way of life for many. Throughout Jewish history, there have always been those who give and those who take. Due to circumstances beyond our control, today's times are creating more who are relegated to take and fewer who are able to give. Yet, the Jewish people have always risen to their appellation of being *rachamanim bnei rachamanim*, compassionate sons of compassionate ones. We help, many doing so beyond their means. Let us peruse some of the *Rabbinic* literature that addresses this critical subject, so that we can better sensitize ourselves to the need to give.

*V'chi yamuch achicha*, “If your brother becomes impoverished.” Do not wait until he becomes poor. *Rashi* cites the *Sifra* which gives the following analogy. When a donkey's load begins to slip off from its back, even one person can right it and prevent the donkey from falling. Once the animal has fallen, however, even five people cannot get it back on its feet. Once our brother has fallen into the pit of bankruptcy, it is so much more difficult to raise him up. Therefore, help him when he is faltering. The *Alshich Hakadosh* notes that the preceding *pesukim* speak in the plural, while this *pasuk* employs *lashon yachid*, the singular: *achicha*, your brother. Why?

The *Alshich* explains that the Torah takes a pragmatic approach towards financial assistance. How often do we direct the fellow in need to see someone else? We always know the address of our well-to-do neighbors, and we are only too happy to give it out. We do anything but offer our own help. It is easy to give the poor man the shirt off someone else's back. What about our own responsibility to offer assistance? The Torah turns to every *yachid*, individual: You must help. You have an obligation. Do not shirk your responsibility and place it upon your wealthy friend. He will do his, but you must do yours!

*Horav Shlomo, z.l., m'Karlin* goes further in his interpretation of the Torah's demand that we help our impoverished brother. *V'hechezakta bo*, “You shall strengthen him.” In order to help another Jew, at times we have to get into the mud with him. If you want to help a Jew who has fallen into the mud, get down on the ground. It is necessary sometimes to get down on the ground with him, into the mud and raise him up. We do not pull him up; we lift him up. In other words, it is easy to write a check, but what about getting our hands dirty and personally doing something about our friend or our neighbor in need?

The *Midrash* says that when a poor man comes to our door asking for assistance, Hashem stands to his right side, as it is written, “That He stands at the right of the destitute” (*Tehillim* 109:31). If you give the poor man what he needs, Hashem will repay you. If you do not, then remember what is written in *Tehillim* 41:2, “Praiseworthy is he who contemplates the needy, on the day of disaster Hashem will deliver him.” What does it mean to be *maskil el dal*, “contemplate the needy”? How

should one consider the plight of the poor man?

The *Chafetz Chaim* paints the following scenario. A person lives his life in this world, and one day he is summoned to his eternal rest. He now has to give an accounting for his deeds. He stands before the Heavenly Tribunal holding a *Sefer Torah*, as he is questioned in regard to each *mitzvah* in the Torah that he is holding – “Did you fulfill this *mitzvah*?” Certainly, he will also be queried regarding the *mitzvah* of *V’hechezakta bo*, “You shall strengthen him.” The Tribunal will refresh his memory. “Remember that night when the poor man came to you asking for help. You told him, ‘Tonight is not good. I cannot help you.’ He turned away dejected, depressed, brokenhearted. You were his last resort.

“The decision to see you did not occur overnight. He spoke it over with his wife, and they felt that – while it was not easy to go to a man of means and beg – they had no other alternative. He gathered up his courage and came to your house and begged – and you said, No! Do you know how he cried that night, the tears of depression that flowed in his house? Do you have any idea how his children must have felt when he came home empty-handed? They lost hope, and it was all because of you.

“Stand here and accept responsibility for your actions: the pain you caused the poor man, his family, and Hashem, Who listened to their inconsolable weeping. As you had no compassion on them, the Heavenly Tribunal will have no compassion on you!”

This, explains the *Chafetz Chaim*, is the meaning of “Praiseworthy is he who contemplates the needy.” He understands their pain, their sorrow, and he does something about it.

Last, I close with a compelling thought from the *Kopitzinitzer Rebbe*, z.l. The *Rebbe* once came unannounced to the home of one of his worshippers. The layman said, “I would have come to the *Rebbe*.” The *Rebbe* smiled, “I need you, so I came to you.” “Please, *Rebbe*, what can I do to help?” the layman asked. “There is a family that is in serious financial straits. The father has no job. The mother must remain home to care for the young children. Two of the children are ill and must have medical intervention which is very expensive. I have taken it upon myself to provide for this family,” the *Rebbe* told him. “If that is the whole problem, the *Rebbe* could have called me, and I would have sent a check,” the layman said. “No,” the *Rebbe* explained. “I feel that this situation warrants a personal visit to explain the seriousness of the problem.”

“*Rebbe*, I will give whatever is needed,” the layman practically pleaded.

“It is not up to me to tell you how much to spend,” the *Rebbe*

explained. “*Tzedakah* is up to the contributor. You must decide for yourself how much to give.”

“*Rebbe*, can I write out a check for the amount?” the layman asked. “Certainly,” answered

the *Rebbe*.

“To whom shall I address the check?” the benefactor asked.

The *Rebbe* looked at the ground, thought for a moment and said haltingly, “Write out the check to *achicha ha’ani*, ‘your impoverished brother.’”

The message was clear: It is not important to know to whom the money is going. A Jew is in need. He is our brother. What more do we need to know? A poor Jew needs neither pedigree nor references.