

"If your brother becomes poor." (25:25)

In the *Midrash*, *Chazal* cite the *pasuk* in *Tehillim* 41:2, regarding this *pasuk*, *ks kt khfan hrat* "'s uvyknh vgr ouhcv "Happy/Praised is he who is considerate of the poor, Hashem will deliver him on the day of evil." What is the meaning of "*maskil el dal*," "being considerate of the poor"? The word "*maskil*" is derived from "*sechel*," thus, "*maskil*" is translated as "one who deals sensibly with the poor." It implies one who is cognizant of the real needs of the poor, addressing them in the most appropriate manner. We must confront the fact that poverty is endemic to human existence. In *Sefer Devarim* 15:11 the *Torah* states, ".rtv cren iuhct ksjh tk hf" , "For the poor will never cease to exist within the land." The *Midrash*, however, seems to indicate that by dealing sensibly with the impoverished one can avoid being stricken himself with poverty. What is the advice offered by *Chazal* ?

The *Midrash* offers a variety of interpretations for "dealing sensibly with the poor," in an ascending order of one's level of involvement with the poor. First is the individual whose positive inclinations dominate his negative ones. This refers to the victim of self-inflicted poverty who must resolve to forswear greed and use his self-restraint to reestablish himself. If he follows the proper channels for earning a livelihood, Hashem will help him.

The individual who gives a *prutah*, penny, to a poor man represents the second level. True, it is not much, but it shows that he is sensitive to the needs of the poor and he is willing to give something, regardless of its value, to another person. There are people, regrettably, who are bothered when they are approached for a donation. They offer all kinds of excuses to justify their lack of sensitivity to another Jew.

Third, is the individual who buries a *meis mitzvah*, an unknown Jew who has no one to care for his burial. No person is poorer than the dead. This act of *chesed* demonstrates a high level of involvement with the poor. In this act we begin to see traces of pure altruism and caring for the less fortunate. We may be so bold as to decry the fact that often the simple Jew "falls between the cracks," that he may be tragically ignored even in death. Attending the funeral of a Jew who has not achieved prominence is also a *meis mitzvah*! Perhaps, if we would be sensitive to the "simple Jew," we would be deserving of greater attention from Hashem.

The last two instances transcend altruism and involve exposure to risk on the part of the benefactor. The fourth type of individual is one who helps a falsely accused person to escape from the clutches of hostile and malicious authorities. It is much easier to be of assistance when no danger is involved. In this case, however, the benefactor exposes himself to great risk in order to help another Jew. This type of caring will surely merit Hashem's blessing.

The fifth and highest degree of "consideration" for the poor is visiting and ministering to the physical and emotional needs of the sick. Health-care assistance has always been a prime focus of activity for *baalei chesed*. In ancient times, however, in addition to the psychological and emotional

stress in caring for the sick, the risk of exposure to contagious diseases was also significant. Indeed, the very person who was the focus of concern could conceivably infect the *baal chesed* with his disease. One who is willing to endanger himself on behalf of others truly deserves to be helped by the Supreme Benefactor.